





## Chapter 1 - As if dead flowers could bloom

Divine era, 300, autumn.

On the top of a towering wall rising over the sea, girls have gathered. Their number, 32. All of them were pure middle schoolers. Other than the girls, there were a masked priestess in white robes and a miko, still young.

The wall they were standing upon was made up of plant matter, and encircled the entirety of Shikoku. It was known as "the barrier", protecting the small ark carrying humanity.

Kusunoki Mebuki, the commander standing in their midst, gave an order: "All hands, ready for battle!"

At her command, all girls took out their smartphones and launched an application. Their bodies changes.

The clothes they were wearing were instantly replaced with a special outfit, and weaponry appeared in their hands: for some - bayoneted rifles, for the others - a massive shield. And power unlike any they felt before came forth from their bodies.

"So this is the power of Shinju-sama..."

Mebuki felt pain in some parts of her head.

She didn't feel joy over this power or outfit. On the contrary, what she felt was frustration and irritation."

"What I wished for wasn't "this"... I was supposed to have gotten..."

"In your battle suits, you mustn't attempt to fight anything more than Stardust" - said the priestess, interrupting Me-buki's thoughts. Again, she thought. How many times do they have to hear this? And in the very end, of course, she'll say this: "You are sentinels. Your goal is not to defeat the enemy. Do not attempt to force yourself".

"Sentinels".

That was the duty of Mebuki and her comrades.

Not "Heroes".

Heroes were the ones taking Shinju's power into their very bodies, the braves tasked with protecting humanity. All of the 32 girls gathered here were originally meant to become them.

The miko, Kokudo Aya, stood before the sentinels.

"O magnanimous Shinju, our great guardian, great lord of the land, we humbly stand before your magnificence and request of you with our very beings to appease you: by Your boundless greatness, grant us strength of soul and safety of body, unaffected by the wicked gods and their wicked deeds, bless us and protect us, we humbly request of You." Chanting the prayer, Aya was surrounded by a mysterious air that was in striking contrast with her youthful appearance.

After finishing the simplified prayer for safety, she expressed her own thoughts.

"All of you, you must come back safe. Absolutely".

She looked earnest, but somehow pained. For the duty of a sentinel was anything but a safe one.

And while she couldn't participate in that duty, Aya couldn't distance herself from it. That was the reason behind her troubled look.

But even that was a source of irritation for Mebuki.

She didn't feel like dying even without the preaching. For her goal was to survive and join the ranks of heroes.

"Well then, here we go!"

With Mebuki at their lead, the girls set out to the other side of the wall. The priestess whispered something, but Mebuki couldn't hear what.

The moment they crossed a certain point of the wall's surface, the scenery in front of the girls' eyes changed.

"So this is the outside of the barrier..."

If one looked from the inside of the barrier, they'd see just the calm blue sky and the Seto Inland Sea. But with just one step outside it, the illusion created with divine powers would vanish, and the true state of the world would appear.

Outside of the barrier surrounding Shikoku was a blazing land that could truly be described as hellish. The land was as if festering with crimson lava, with flame billowing out here and there. A part of the blighted land was covered in what seemed to be gigantic eggs. The sky was dark as in the deepest night.

But Mebuki didn't falter. She had no time to waste being shocked."

"Everyone, we're descending from the wall! Don't scatter up, gather in one place!"

At her instructions, the girls jumped down from the massive wall one by one and stood upon the festering land.

Their battle suits were specifically made to endure the scorching heat of the outside world. In that function alone they surpassed the equipment the heroes wore. Thanks to them, the sentinels could operate on the burnt land with relative freedom.

"Waaaaah?!" It's red, it's scary! This looks way more dangerous than what it sounded like, Mebu!" - screamt Kagajou Suzume, crouching and clinging to Mebuki.

"Get off, Suzume, I can't move".

"Waah, there's a bunch of white things flying?!"

In the dark sky, there were countless grotesque beings floating around. Monsters with disgusting gigantic white bodies and organs that looked like a mouth.

"That's "Stardust". We learned about them, you know."

"They're way more gross than I ever imagined! And all of these are our enemies? Nuh uh, no way, no way!"

"Our mission isn't defeating them, it's just gathering".

"Even so, they'll still attack us... See? Here they come!"

A group of Stardust flew in the girls' direction.

Mebuki and the rest have been told that these beings appear to instinctively target humans.

"Gyaah, I'll die! They'll kill me, they'll kill me for sure! Save me, Mebuuuu!" Suzume's crying and screaming was making Mebuki's head hurt.

"What are you afraid of? Is this not precisely the time to show our worth?"

Saying that, Miroku Yumiko dashed to the front. Grasping her weapon, a bayoneted rifle, she was readying to assault the Stardust.

"I shall distinguish myself here, so that the Miroku family shall..."

Mebuki's irritation grew stronger. Cowardly and foolhardy. Both to their extremes.

"Suzume, stop panicking! Miroku-san, don't overextend!"

"Gh!"

At the sound of Mebuki's voice, Suzume jolted and stopped crying and Yumiko stopped moving with a displeased face.

"Gunner squad, get ready to fire!"

Following her order, all of the girls bearing rifles simultaneously pointed their muzzles at the Stardust. Including Mebuki and Yumiko, most of the girls were equipped with bayoneted rifles. Usable for both stabbing and shooting, they were weapons capable of fighting both at close and long range.

"Fire!"

Following the command, a volley of simultaneous shots was fired.

The approaching Stardust received it and fell apart, disappearing.

"Y-you beat them... You beat them, Mebu!"

Suzume's eyes started shining.

"That's right. Surprised, are you?... Humanity's prepared some thorough measures for you".

It appears that these creatures were what drove humanity to the brink of extinction in the previous era.

"Don't mess with us" - thought Mebuki. "Humanity wouldn't fall to things like that. It musn't".

"Shall we defeat the ones far away as well?" - asked Yumiko, pointing her muzzle at other Stardust drifting through the sky, her finger at the trigger.

"Miroku-san, our duty is investigation and gathering. There's no need to engage in pointless battles".

"But killing one more of these shall not pose a problem, shall it? Or might you, Mebuki-san, be worried that if I get serious and earn achievements to my name, your position as the commander will get uncertain? Fufu, but worrying about the successes of your rival is only natural, after all" - said Yumiko with slight elation.

Mebuki's headache kept getting worse. She wanted her to stop with the onesided rival treatment.

Then Mebuki felt someone tugging at her outfit. That someone was Yamabushi Shizuku, a 2nd grader, just like Mebuki.

"What is it, Shizuku?"

Shizuku silently pointed her finger.

Following it, Mebuki saw three girls on the ground, unable to stand up from fear. One of them even wet herself

"Oh my. If you are that afraid, why not return inside the barrier?"

Mebuki turned to Yumiko, who said with a troubled facepalm, and shook her head.

"There's no retreat for us. Everyone, gather around!"

At her order, everyone circled around the three girls clenched with terror to protect them.

This was their first time outside the wall. Their mission was something as simple as "Bringing back soil and lava from outside, even if just a small bit". It

was also most likely meant to get the sentinels used to their duty. And that meant they couldn't fail, have deserters or take losses.

More Stardust were approaching the girls, who stood in a complete squad formation. The amount of enemies was several times more than before.

"Gunner squad, get ready to fire! Protector squad, line up the shields!"

"Mebu, protector squad means me, right?"

"Obviosly! You're holding a shield, aren't you? Gunner squad, volley!"

The sentinels' gunfire once again broke down the Stardust. But this time, not all of them were put down. The ones that withstood the fire drew closer.

"Shields!"

"Gyaah! Save me!" - cried out Suzume, thrusting her shield in front of her. The other girls bearing shields followed suit, raising them together. The shields enlarged and combined with each other, surrounding the entire team with a mighty wall. The Stardust's charges bounced off its surface.

"Now! Stab them!"

The shieldbearers then intentionally created gaps in the wall, through which the gunner squad stabbed with their bayonets. The Stardust were skewered upon them.

"Did it!"

This was the girls' way of fighting.

The sentinels were divided into three groups.

The gunner type, bearing bayoneted rifles to eliminate the hostiles.

The protector type with large shield, specialised on defense.

And the officer type, who leads the rest and gives out orders.

Although the officer type's weapon was a boyoneted rifle as well, both it's firepower and the defense of the battle suit were higher than that of the gunner types.

The sentinels formation consisted of 16 gunners, including Miroku Yumiko

and Yamabushi Shizuku, 8 protectors, counting Kagajou Suzume, and 8 officers, Kusunoki Mebuki included.

The protectors alone made up the protector squad, while the gunner squad included the officers as well.

While their combination defeated the group attacking just then, the enemy kept coming one after another, raining blows upon the shield wall.

"Aaaaa, this is bad, this is bad! Save me, Mebu!"

Suzuki kept whining to Mebuki, being a miserable sight of sweat and tears streaming down her face.

"You have to be the one to save yourself!" Trust yourself!"

"I can't trust myself!"

While annoying, Suzume was capable of instinctive movements that were very precise at blocking the assault of the Stardust.

But as the attacks continued, fatigue started taking its toll.

"Kyaa!"

One of the protector girls couldn't endure the attack of the Stardust and was knocked down. A portion of the shield wall crumbled.

The rest of the protector squad scrambled to close the breach, but they weren't able to do it fast enough to stop one of the Stardust from breaking through the gap and grabbing one of the rifles with its mouth-like organ. The rifle's owner was pulled by the Stardust's monstrous power and flung outside the shield wall.

"Hiiiiii?!"

And then a countless number of Stardust surrounded her. The white monstrocities looked like a horde of giant mag-gots covering a corpse.

"I won't let anyone die!"

Mebuki leapt outside the shields and started cutting into the monsters attacking the girl. The sharp point of the bayonet pierced right through the white giants. Compared to the rounds the rifle fired, the bayonet blade was

much stronger at eliminating the Stardust. A single strike was enough to fell them. One by one, Mebuki massacred the Stardust, then picked up the girl who was about to get consumed and returned back inside the shield wall.

"Haah... Haah..."

Thanks to the battle suit's protection, the unlucky girl had bite marks all over her body, but didn't receive any fatal wounds.

As if she'd ever let someone from a unit she'd leading die. Mebuki was moved by fury, compassion and pride in equal measure.

Covered in sweat, the girl recalled how she came to be here...

Kusunoki Mebuki was born in the Tamamochou city of the Kagawa prefecture. By the time she became aware of herself, she had just one parent, and was brought up by her father. Her father was a carpenter who worked on construction and repairs of Taisha-related shrines. His serious personality and peerless skills gained him immense trust with the Taisha and great respect from his colleagues. But, as Mebuki heard later from the surrounding adults, that serious and overly stubborn personality of his was falling, making him unable to see his surroundings when it concerned his work. That was also the reason behind his divorce with Mebuki's mother. He was silent, devoting himself to his work from the moment he'd wake till he'd fall asleep. He'd maintain his tools even when resting, when he worked with historical buildings he'd inspect and diligently research them and never for a moment stopped honing his own skills with his own works. He had no interest in alcohol, entertainment or women, and would rather spend his time devoting himself to more work or research. Those jealous of his skills would whisper around that his lifestyle has no humanity or joy in it. Indeed, his overly stoic life might have been lacking humanity. But precisely because of that, it gained a sense of holiness instead. By the time Mebuki gained awareness of herself, she could only look at her father's back. Tirelessly developing his skills, admired by people, making great contributions to Taisha - Mebuki was proud of that father of hers. That's why the motherless Mebuki wanted to support him, and focused on bettering herself. From elementary school, she always exerted herself to the fullest. That why she didn't lose to anyone, be it studying or sports. She wanted to become a person like her father, capable of work that would get her respected by

everyone...

That was her dream.

Her father didn't pay much attention to his daughter. He would neither praise nor scold her.

And then in her 6th grade of elementary school, a messenger from the Taisha came to the Kusunoki house.

"We want to entrust a duty of utmost importance to your accomplished daughter".

That was the first time the father praised her. He said that she was his pride. The girl was happy. Her efforts were finally recognised, she thought.

Her father and relatives sent Mebuki out. All of them said things like "You're a great girl!", "Take care!" and "Good luck!"

"Even in Taisha, continue your efforts. Don't end up crushed beneath the wheel."

She forgot who exactly said that. She didn't understand what they meant either. But that phrase somehow got vividly carved deep inside a corner of her mind.

Crushed beneath the wheel.

The place where Mebuki was brought was a facility that combined a school and training grounds. Apart from her, there were around 20 girls of close age. From their number, only one would be selected and entrusted with the duty of a "hero".

What is a hero? The Taisha priestess, who became the girls' teacher, explained to them.

"Heroes are those of utmost importance to the country, the people who bear the duty of protecting mankind. As you should already know, 298 years ago, in the beginning of the Divine Era, the majority of humanity was wiped out by a horrible lethal virus. The people of Shikoku were able to construct a wall to separate themselves from the virus and its carriers and preserve peace.

All of this was commonly taught in schools. And of course, Mebuki with her

excellent grades knew this basic history. But what she heard later was news to her.

"However, throughout human history, there would occur disasters and incidents beyond human powers. And at those times, there would appear those with powers exceeding human knowledge, who accepted them from Shinjusama, to protect mankind. Those were "Heroes". Ordinarily, their existence isn't known. But you must know the name of Nogi, right?

Nogi was one of the most venerable houses of Taisha, or so Mebuki has heard.

"The Nogi family are descendants of one of the original heroes from the beginning of the Divine Era. Thus, heroes have existed throughout history and protected the people in secret. Moreover, a few days ago..."

For a moment, the priestess was lost for words. She wore a mask, so her facial expression could not be seen.

"One of the present day heroes retired from her duty. However, she left behind her "Terminal that grants hero's power". One of you will be selected to be a new hero, using that terminal. But the duty of a hero is by no means an easy one. It isn't a burden anyone could bear. Thus, amongst your already excellent number, we will select the one who possesses the strength most adequate to be laid upon the duties of a hero.

The days of competition between the hero candidates began.

The girls, in addition to normal school lessons, underwent special training in order to become heroes. Their spirits were grown through mental training, their basic stamina was built, and they took lessons in swordsmanship as well.

To be selected as a hero, they had to train with dual swords. The hero that retired from their duty originally used a pair of axes, but its power was customised into a pair of swords instead.

Even thought her environment changed, Mebuki's lifestyle did not. Without a moment of respite, she continued to better herself. To bear the glorious duty of a hero... If Mebuki's efforts resulted in that, how wonderful would that be?

Through her meticulous hard work, she inched ever closer to the back of her

father, with his position and skills. All of the hero candidates worked hard, but Mebuki's devotion surpassed them all.

She was at the training grounds before the sun rose, and continued to practice her swordsmanship after the sun fell, until her arms couldn't move anymore. After returning to the dorm, she'd use workout machines to keep building her physical strength. When that was over, she would look at recordings of real swordmasters and do image training.

Even when her body was wrecked with a cold, even when she was hurting with growing pains, she never missed a day of practice. 365 days of the year, apart from sleep, were all used to train herself. Sometimes she would vomit or faint from overworking herself. The doctors would constantly tell her not to strain herself too hard. As if you could ever accomplish anything without that. Her father, even when ill, perfectly did his work without a single complaint. With her unbending lifestyle, Mebuki continued to exert herself.

She paid attention to her food as well. Using athlete menus and nutrition advice, she only consumed nutritious foods rich in protein, unconcerned with their taste. The only thing that mattered to her was whether they could help her become stronger.

Because strength wasn't the only selection criteria, Mebuki didn't slack off with her studies either. In class, she focused on the teacher's words, and afterwards, without reducing her training time, remembered it all right there. It was a way to train her concentration as well.

This way of life left her with no time to play with the rest of the candidates. Inevitably, she became isolated, but Mebuki didn't mind. The time wasted on other people could be better spent on training, after all. She paid no attention to the other candidates' talks about their favourite TV shows or their talks of fleeting enamourment with the male Taisha officials that sometimes entered the facility.

After a year has passed, the amount of the candidates in the facility was half of what it was in the start. The ones who were judged inadequate in their abilities were sent back to their homes.

Amongst those that remained, two stood out the most. One of them was

Mebuki. The other one's name was Miyoshi Karin.

In swordsmanship and physical ability their marks were nearly equal. As a matter of course, Mebuki was aware of Karin.

Karin, as well, was a girl strict with herself, tempering herself all on her own. However, she wasn't as thorough with that as Mebuki. When during training somebody was troubled or worried, she couldn't leave them alone.

"Hmmmmm... When you're moving your right arm, you don't pay attention to your left one".

"Miroku-senpai, you shouldn't force yourself to swing both blades at once. Start with your dominant arm, then support the move with the other one".

"I see... Wait, Miyoshi-san?! To be taught by an underclassman... I bring shame to the Miroku home! But you are right, this makes it much easier to move! My gratitude!"

Sometimes, when other girls would feel bad, she'd interrupt her training and take them to the infirmary.

Mebuki viewed Karin's actions as nothing else but resignment from the competition. The time wasted being concerned about others should be spent on your own training instead. Karin shouldn't be reducing her own training time.

One day, when Mebuki and Karin were the only ones still working out on the training grounds, Mebuki called out to her.

"Miyoshi-san. Making friends won't help you win in the selection. Helping others with their training while neglecting your own... Honestly, I think that's naive of you."

Karin, who realised that herself, reddened and rebutted.

"I-I'm not trying to make friends! And I'm not naive! Teaching others is a form of training as well, and helping them actually all ties in into my own training!"

What a lame rebuttal. So in the end, she's still a naive girl who can't help it but help others out.

"Well, whatever. As long as that naivete is with you, I'll be the one selected as

a hero."

"I said I'm not naive!"

As if her mood was ruined, Karin said "I'll go train at the dorm!" and headed towards the training ground's exit. However, halfway through she turned around and threw a small bottle towards Mebuki. She catched it. The label on the bottle read "citric acid", and inside of it were pills.

"What?" - Mebuki raised her eyebrows.

"It's good for you!" - Karin curtly blurted out before leaving the training grounds.

After returning the dorm, Mebuki found out that citric acid helps with fatigue recovery and muscle pains. Karin must've noticed that Mebuki had muscle pains from her movements during the battle.

Looking at the small bottle of citric acid supplement, Mebuki whispered: "That's exactly why you're naive".

One more year passed. Karin's lifestyle didn't change, in the end. Although she didn't like mingling with people much, she wasn't that absolute about it.

At the time, there were five girls remainin in the facility, including Mebuki and Karin.

One day, the priestess told them: "There has been an oracle that said a great crisis will befall Shikoku before long. Soon, the final selection will be performed, and one of you will be picked to bear the duty of a hero, embraced in the gods' power"



Swordsmanship, physical abilities, decision-making during a battle. Based off these criteria, both Karin and Mebuki were convinced they'd be the one chosen.

The final selection wouldn't be a precise test. They didn't know how exactly it would be conducted.

"They'll probably start grading me and Miyoshi-san in everyday life from now on and pick the one with the higher points" - so thought Mebuki. If so, she wasn't going to lose to anyone. Mebuki lived, having cut away everything that wasn't needed to become a hero. Entertainment, love, friendship: she cast away everything and honed herself to a razor edge. She couldn't lose to someone with the flabs of joy and friendship. Mebuki continued living her life the same way she did before.

Following the announcement of the final selection, Mebuki's grades at training surpassed Karin's, even if by a small amount. And, a month later...

Mebuki was summoned by her priestess-teacher. She was convinced it was to tell her she was selected as the hero.

What the priestess said was this: "The person who was chosen for the hero duty is Miyoshi-san."

"...eh?"

"You've put in more effort than anyone, so it would not be a surprise if either of you were selected. However, this is the will of Taisha and Shinju-sama."

"...b-but how?.."

Mebuki staggered, her vision distorted. Her head was hot as if boiling, while her body felt like it was drained of all its heat.

"I... I couldn't have lost to her in grades! I was better than Miyoshi-san! But why-Ugh"

She felt like throwing up, but held it in with her lips.

"Calm down, Kusunoki-san! You're pallid, you need to go to the infirmary right awa-"

"How am I supposed to calm down?! What were the selection criteria? Redo

it! I won't accept this! Ne-haah, haaah..."

It hurts to breathe. I can't breathe properly.

"Don't raise your voice, collect your breathing."

"This, this... must be some kind of mistake... haaah....haah..."

"There can't be a mistake in the selection results. We all understand your efforts and excellence. That's why-"

"But then why?! Uuuh..."

"I understand your feelings. But you have to accept these results. First of all, we need to get you to the infirmary."

The other priests came and tried supporting the staggering Mebuki.

"Don't touch me!" - Mebuki swept away their hands and glared at the priestess.

"I will never accept this! I'm the one who's fit to be the hero"

Then several priests restrained Mebuki, who looked like she was about to assault the priestess any moment. "Cercine, now!" - someone said.

One of the priests brought a doctor from the infirmary, who gave Mebuki an injection. Her mind immediately went into a blur, strength draining from her body.

Because Karin was selected to be the hero, Mebuki and the rest were sent to their hometowns. They were forbidden to leak any information related to heroes... not that anyone would believe a girl saying "I undertook training to become a hero that would protect the country" in the first place. Perhaps because the Taisha understood that, they didn't perform any other measures. When she returned home, Mebuki's father didn't say a word to her. No reproach, no praise. Because the girl chose that path and earnestly struggled all on her own, he felt that he had no place to say anything, whatever the result.

Mebuki enrolled in a local middle school. The dream-like days of being drunk on pride and full of ambition to win were over.

Mebuki wasn't able to fit in with her classmates in middle school. She didn't

know far too many things. She didn't know what's popular. She didn't know how to carry a conversation. She didn't have any fun topics to talk about with others. She didn't understand how to carry yourself with people and have fun with them. She didn't know any songs to sing at the karaoke. She couldn't understand the love stories that got the rest of the girls her age so excited. All of those were useless to becoming a hero, so Mebuki discarded them.

That was the end result of the two years' worth of effort she sacrificed everything for. The only thing left in the end was a girl who didn't have a single thing that one would normally gain through simply living their life.

Mebuki, clenching her teeth, spent her school days in misery.

"And this is the result of those days... I spent almost throwing up blood?.."

Swinging her swords until she was about to vomit, overworking herself until she was about to faint, cramming protein-rich foods down her throat, training her body while enduring growing pains so strong she could cry: all of that was meaningless.

The sleepless days went on.

Whenever she'd get into her futon at night and closer her eyes, she would always see the day she was told the hero selection results again and wake up in fury.

"What should I have done? How could I have gotten me to be selected? I didn't lose to her in grades, so how? What did I need to do to become a hero then?" - Mebuki kept asking herself that question without an answer endlessly.

Crushed beneath the wheel. She remembered those words somebody said to her.

Mebuki got up from her futon and searched the internet for the meaning of those words. To fall beneath the wheel (Unter die Räder geraten), was a saying from a foreign country in the previous era, meaning "to be ruined".

"A, hahaha... that's right, I got crushed right beneath it, didn't I... p>hahaha..."

Mebuki had no recollection of who said that to her, but she knew that they were absolutely right.

Before long, the seasons changed, and the sharp rays of the summer sun softened up...

And another Taisha messenger came to the Kusunoki house.

"Kusunoki Mebuki, your powers are required to protect mankind"

The place she was brought to was in a city on the riverbank of the Daisoku river: a building 158 metres tall - the Gold Tower. Constructed back in the past era, it was now under the management of Taisha. This place was closed off for a few years because of a large-scale construction happening, but even that seems to have come to an end. Mebuki stepped into the elevator on the first floor and, in a flash, was sent up towards the viewing platform. The middle part of the Gold Tower had no floors and was only made up of the steel framework. The exterior was covered in a gold-en-coloured half-mirror, so from the elevator rising up into the sky she could see the sea. Since the sky was cloudy that day, the sea was painted with a dull grey.

"A task from the Taisha... What could this be about?.."

She could not understand why they'd summon her, who they already branded a failure once.

When they finally arrived at the viewing platform, the elevator opened.

Beyond the doors was a gathering of girls in Mebuki's age range. Amongst them, there were even some against whom she competed for the status of a hero.

"This couldn't be anything else. This must be a new hero selection" - thought Mebuki. Her stagnating spirit has started to regain its former energy.

"I see everyone's assembled, then".

A priestess appeared. She was wearing a mask that covered her face, but Mebuki knew from the voice: it was the exact same person who guided them during the hero selection. Blood rushed to Mebuki's face, but her expression remained calm.

The girls gathered in the Gold Tower turned their eyes towards the priestess.

"The ones gathered here right now are all former hero candidates".

According to the woman's words, there were two types of hero candidates.

Ones like Mebuki, candidates to inherit the power of a previous hero.

And the members of the so-called "groups with high hero aptitude girls" from all around Shikoku.

Since year 298, Taisha has been simultaneously working on two projects.

The first one was the plan to monitor the girls in Shikoku for their hero aptitude and establish groups of high aptitude girls in various areas. If a disaster or an incident beyond human powers occured, one of those groups would eventually end up chosen by the Shinju and become heroes. They, despite their high aptitude, however, would be amateurs at fighting. So it was considered necessary to have someone that could guide their actions as their vanguard.

Thus, the second plan: training an expert who would assuredly become a hero. For that purpose, "girls with high aptitude close mentally to the previous retired hero so as to inherit their power", were gathered. Those were Mebuki, Miyoshi Karin and the rest.

The ones gathered there that day were the members of the hero groups not chosen by Shinju and those deemed un-qualified to inherit the previous hero's power.

In other words, the dropouts who couldn't become heroes.

"Everyone here has high hero aptitude. We would like to make use of it and entrust a new duty to all of you".

As the priestess spoke, an image appeared on the screen. It was an image unlike any Mebuki and the rest have seen before.

A land festering with redness, a deeply dark sky, eerie bug-like beings floating through it, and gigantic creatures one could not be certain of if whether manmade or natural. Mebuki thought it was a scene from some movie. But what was the reason behind them being shown that?

"This is the true shape of the world" - the priestess stated.

The girls stared blankly, none of them able to grasp the meaning of those words.

"The wall encircling Shikoku... The image you see here is what lies beyong that wall."

"The outside... of the wall? What might you be implying by that?", so raised the question one girl with a strong-willed expression on her face.

"Certainly, we have heard that the outside world has been ravaged by a lethal virus. However, this kind of situation...

How could a virus cause the land and the sky to be this way? And just what might these eerie monsters be?"

"Your doubts are entirely justified... It's time to tell you the concealed history of mankind".

The priestess started her explanation in a grim voice.

Humanity being whittled down by a virus in the past era was a lie. In reality, grotesque beings known as "Vertexes" suddenly appeared and drove mankind to the brink of extinction.

It was exactly the "Disaster or incident beyond human powers" when a hero needed to appear. A vague expression, but in other words, it was the time when the Vertexes assaulted Shikoku. The duty of the heroes was to repel the Vertexes, enemy of mankind.

The image on the screen changed.

What appeared was a sight of girls dressed in special outfits fighting the giant grotesque creatures - the Vertexes. Their power was immense, and the girls were covered in wounds, falling apart.

"Ah..."

It was then Mebuki understood it. The meaning of those words the priestess once said, "One of the present day heroes retired from her duty". It wasn't just a retirement. She was killed in action. By those monsters called Vertexes.

"Shinju-sama is an agglomeration of the earthly gods, while the Vertexes are beings sent by the heavenly gods to destroy humanity. The outside world has been turned into the underworld by the heavenly gods' power. Due to the barrier Shinju-sama has created, Shikoku alone managed to narrowly escape

the same fate and be preserved in a state where humans could live".

Earthly gods, the gods residing in the land.

Heavenly gods, the gods residing in the sky above.

Through the heroes' efforts, Shikoku was defended, and Shinju's illusion allowed the people to escape from the world's alteratio

"However, as it stands now, eventually Shinju's power will fade, the barrier will vanish and Shikoku, too, will be engulfed in the flames and perish. To break this deadlock, us humans must make a move as well. For that purpose, we want to ask of you to fulfill the duty of conducting a thorough investigation of the outside world to allow us to prepare for a counterattack."

"Nonono, not happening, not happening, not happening! We can't fight these monsters! We'll die, totally die, there's no way we can't die! Uh, well, I've got a bad headache so I'm gonna go back now."

A pale-faced girl mumbled while making a sharp 180. However, she couldn't escape the priestess' eyes.

"Kagajou-san, don't try to leave on your own! Of course, we will not let you embark on such a dangerous mission just as you are, in the flesh. You will be given power to fight."

The heroes had immense divine protection bestowed upon them and given tremendous powers to fight the Vertexes. The Taisha have learned to control it technologically to a certain degree and created a system to allow the heroes to draw out the gods' power when they need to.

The sentinels would be be bestowed with the mass-production version of that system. Their power, compared to that of the heroes, would be reduced, but the amount of possible users would increase drastically.

While receiving sentinel training, Mebuki and the rest would live at the Gold Tower. It looked like the situation would be quite tight.

The sentinels were divided into bayoneted rifle users and shield users, and each group received their own battle training.

Mebuki received training on how to fight with dual swords before. However,

the bayoneted rifle was a weapon with a fighting style that couldn't be more different from that one of a pair of swords.

To use the rifle part, sharpshooting skills were necessary, and the use of a bayonet required spearmanship. And to utilise the power of the sentinels' numbers, they needed to be able to fight in groups.

Mebuki had to learn to fight from the beginning, again. For an extraordinary hard worker like her, learning everything from th scratch was not a problem at all. But inside her chest, a whirlpool of anger was rampaging.

"The Taisha named me a failure... and now they're summoning me again because they need help? What am I, their convenient tool? And we're not even heroes... A worthless duty for mass-produced types... Are they saying that we, hero failures, should be capable of at least that? Are they making a fool of me?!"

Then...

Then I'll make them recognise.

"I'll fulfill this duty beyond those Taisha' wildest expectations and make them accept that I was the one suitable for the hero position. I'll teach them that not picking me was a mistake!"

Mebuki learned both how to use the bayoneted rifle and how to fight in formation frighteningly fast.

Before long, the girls finished their training programs and it was the time to select the officers. The ordinary sentinels were lead by officer types, and above them was the one leading the entire unit, the commander.

"Volunteers, raise your hand" - said the priestess, and Mebuki's hand moved accordingly. Several other girls raised their hands as well. The priestess looked at their faces and nodded.

"Next, we'll decide on how to test your skills".

A mock battle with bayonets, marksmanship testing, physical testing and observation of commanding skills... Various examinations took place.

Mebuki, not letting anyone to even come close to her, earned the top score

and was assigned the post of the commander. Thanks to her excellent results, both Taisha officials and the other sentinels all accepted her assignment... save for one person.

"Kusunoki Mebuki-san! Although, regrettably, this time I was not able to surpass you, training and real battle are different things! In our real duty I, Miroku Yumiko, shall earn more feats of glory than you!"

"Uuh... Who are you, exactly?"

"Whaaaaaaat? Eh? Please wait just a moment! Could it be that you did not recognise me?"

The face of the girl named Miroku Yumiko was drained of its colour.

"Uh, well..."

Mebuki awkwardly nodded.

It hasn't even been a month since the 32 sentinels met. Mebuki, who spent the majority of her time training, barely even remembered the faces of the rest.

"I-impossible! I have, in the past, along with you and Miyoshi-san, honed myself as a hero candidate! From that point! Are you trying to say that I have been entirely out of your notice?! You are lying! You are, are you not?!"

It appears that it's been much more than a month since those particular two met.

She must've had middling abilities. If she was as skilled as Miyoshi Karin, Mebuki would've definitely remembered her.

Then she recalled: back during her hero candidate days, there was a vigorous upperclassman who would recklessly charge in during mock battles. That girl would keep yelling things "By the honour of the Miroku house!" or "For the glory of the Miroku name!"

Mebuki clapped her hands together.

"Aah, I remembered. That's right, you were there, Miroku-san".

"Aaaah! So you genuinely did not recognise me? Is that it?!"

After all that ruckus, Mebuki became the commander of the sentinels and

continued her training until the day to start their duty finally came.

Miroku Yumiko decided, on her own, to see Mebuki as her rival and tried to pick at her all the time.

Kagajou Suzume, a font of endless pessimism with zero confidence in herself, after understanding that Mebuki was the strongest amongst the sentinels, kept constantly begging her with teary eyes: "When our duty starts, you've gotta protect me! Absolutely! You've got to, hear me! If you don't protect me, I'm definitely going to die, you see!"

Yamabushi Shizuku, an extremely silent girl, for some reason got strangely attached to the unsociable Mebuki and always hanged around close to her

There was one more girl, who could be said to be tasked with keeping an eye on the sentinels. Capable of receiving oracles from Shinju, she was someone called a "Miko" - Kokudo Aya. Her appearance was so young, Mebuki mistook her for an elementary schooler a first, but she was apparenly in first year of middl school.

And then it came: the day when the sentinels' duties finally started.

The Stardust kept relentlessly assaulting the girls.

Because of the injured and the girls gripped with panic, Mebuki and the rest were unable to move. But because their mission was to recover even a small bit of soil and lava from outside, they could fulfill it even without moving. The problem was in the numbers of the Stardust. If they kept relying on the shields of the protector squad, another break-through similar to the one just before could collapse the defense.

Mebuki gave an order after a moment of thinking.

"Protector squad, continue defending the team! Sentinels 2 to 8, repel the Stardust outside and lighten the load for the protectors! Other hands, start gathering!"

Following her words, everyone started moving.

The sentinels bearing numbers from 2 to 8, the highly skilled officers, exited the shield wall and confronted the Stardust. The protector sentinels continued

holding the wall formation and protecting the gunners. The latter, defended by the protectors, started putting lumps of soil and lava inside pear-shaped tubes. Those tubes were called Kagami, and were special tools for harvesting. They could even hold something as extremely hot as lave without a problem.

Mebuki, bearing the number of 1, used her bayonet and battled the Stardust.

"I will definitely fulfill this duty perfectly and get promoted to a hero! ...the life I've lead until now, all of the things I've cast away, all of the efforts I've put in, I won't let them be in vain!"

With fury in every strike, Mebuki annihilated the enemy. But there were too much of them, after all. Slipping through her guard, a Stardust closed in from the back.

```
"Guh!"
"This is bad-"
"I shall not allow you!"
```

Yumiko leapt outside the defense of the protectors and thrust right at the Stardust attempting to devour Mebuki, felling it.

"Just now, your life has been saved by Miroku Yumiko, and it would do you well not to forget this!"

And then, Yumiko continued to fight the oncoming Stardust.

"Miroku-san, follow the orders and return to collecting!"

"Fufu, it is far more suitable for me to battle the enemy on the frontlines than to bother with such trifling matters. I, Miroku Yumiko, shall take the most enemy heads! Not that these things have any!"

Yumiko continued fighting, full of vigor.

```
"...haaah."
```

Mebuki let out a sigh. But Yumiko's words weren't wrong, her personality was suited to battle much more than a job like collecting. The battlefield required resourcefulness... Thinking that, Mebuki decided to leave her be.

Another group of Stardust approached Mebuki.

"Mebuuuu!"

Suzume separated from the rest of the protectors and set her shield up in front of Mebuki.

Thanks to the shield blocking the Stardust's attacks, Mebuki was able to take them down one by one.

"Thanks for the help, Suzume!"

"Mebu, if you died, who'd protect me?! You've absolutely gotta survive and keep protecting me, got it?!"

"..."

Begging for protection while protecting someone herself. She strayed from Mebuki's orders, but in doing so also saved her.

Meanwhile, Shizuku, just as Mebuki ordered, silently and indifferently kept gathering the samples. Taking the kagami of the girls incapacitated by injury and panic and the protectors who couldn't get away from their shields as well, she kept stuffing them with soil and lava. It was to gather even the tiniest bit more.

Yumiko, Suzumu and Shizuku. All of them were accomplishing quite a lot of with their resourceful actions.

"The Taisha people, Shinju-sama, I bet they think of us as "weaklings who couldn't become heroes"... But we can do this! We are not failures!"

Crushed beneath the wheel.

That phrase surfaced in her mind. Gripping her rifle, Mebuki thought.

"Bring it on! We're not going to get crushed! We'll break the damn wheel to pieces!"

After a sufficient amount of samples has been gathered and it looked like the protectors were about to give out, Mebuki screamt.

"Begin the retreat! Those who can, help the wounded and panicked move! Nobody's going to die! We'll all return back alive!"

Battered, the sentinels returned inside the barrier. They were uncertain

whether to be happy that no one died or to be sad that someone got wounded.

But one thing was certain: all of the sentinels came back alive from their maiden battle.

"I will definitely become a hero... For that, I'll do anything!"

What moved Kusunoki Mebuki was her fury.

For her own pride, so that no one could deny her way of life, the girl would keep fighting.

This story will not tell of beautiful flowers blossoming splendidly. This is a story of nameless, ignored weeds, trampled without looking, but still frantically trying to survive.

It is a story of those who were not heroes.

It is a story of those who would become heroes.

(Chapter 1 end)





## Chapter 2 - To cut one's belly with a branch

"I'm sorry... I'm honestly sorry..." - kept muttering the girl with her head hanged right in front of Mebuki's eyes.

"Are you really okay with that!? You took all that sentinel training, and now you're just going to give up!? Besides, if our numbers drop, our duty will..."

"I'm sorry... It's too much for me... Sorry..." - interrupting Mebuki, the girl kept repeating.

(This one is done for, thought Mebuki. Her will has been completely broken.) "...anyway, just give it some more thought".

"Okay... but I don't think my decision will change... I'm really sorry..."

The girl left the room with downcast eyes. Left alone in her room, Mebuki let out a sigh.

"That's the third one, huh..."

After their first task was over, three girls came out and said they couldn't continue being sentinels anymore. All of them have been told about the disaster that befell the world outside the barrier before they departed. But the spectacle that unfolded before the girls' eyes turned out to be far more despairful than they could've ever imagined.

Blighted land as far as the eye can see, monstrosities to which there was no end no matter how many you defeated...

While their previous mission saw no losses, a lot of the sentinels took injuries. Some were grave enough to require operations. Seeing such injuries right in front of them, some inevitably froze with fear, afraid that they could be the next in the line.

Mebuki talked with all three of the ones who wanted to leave the sentinels. As a result, one changed her mind. The other two, however, were completely

deaf to Mebuki's words.

"How pathetic... Not having been selected as heroes and now running away like that..." - spat out Mebuki with irritation.

The power of the Vertexes the heroes fought was incomparable with that of Stardust. But the sentinels were scared and ran even from it. As if showing the difference between the standing of a hero and a sentinel. As if saying "You really are failures".

"I'm... different", - Mebuki clenched her fist.

"I'm not a failure. I'll definitely become a hero".

Mebuki came up to the viewing platform of the Gold Tower. In the past, there were only floors on the top part of this tower on several floors near the bottom of it. The space between those was empty, save for the steel beams of the construction. But after Taisha's renovation, the amount of floors increased, and private rooms for the sentinels were made. The viewing platform, however, was in its untouched state. If you looked towards the sea, you could see the ruins of the Great Bridge and the wall surrounding Shikoku. Casting your gaze inwards would show you the Marugame Castle and the Sanukifuji.

"...it hurts..." - mumbled Mebuki as loathsome memories flowed into her head.

Gravely injured - 2 people, broken mentally - 2 people. For sentinels, who relied on numbers to fight, any vacancies in the formation threatened the entire squad. Immediately healing the wounded was impossible, but somehow stopping those who were on the verge of giving up was still a distinct possibility.

"I have heard that there are two who want to relinquish the duty of a sentinel".

"|"

Turning around towards the voice, Mebuki saw the usual priestess. She was, as always, wearing her mask, and her facial expression wasn't visible.

The news of there were being people who wanted to retire already reached the Taisha, it seemed. "And there are two gravely wounded people, unable to

fight. There is no time to wait until their recovery for the next mission. Since all of the highly capable officer types are able to fight, we can probably replace them right away".

After her detached announcement, the priestess turned away from Mebuki, stepped into the elevator and went down from the platform.

"Replace?.." - Mebuki kept repeating the priestess' words. Her heart was faintly abuzz.

Mebuki's morning began early. Before the sun rose, she'd wake up, change to her training clothes and leave the Tower. She'd start running from the nearby seaside park towards the station, then run along the coast, following the railroad tracks, and return back to the park. She's been running through this course for two weeks already. After she became a sentinel, running became Mebuki's daily routine. After that, she'd head towards the dojo in the training facility. It was formerly an entertainment establishment near the Tower, but it has been remodeled to be the sentinels' training grounds.

Mebuki would be the only one at the dojo at those hours. Using a wooden rifle - a wooden replica of a bayoneted rifle, not unlike a shinai used for kendo - she'd practice her skills. Starting with the frontal stabs, upper stabs, downward stabs, continuous stabs, slashing stabs and various practical moves combining those. Being aware of how her muscles and joints reacted to every strike, with an image of her ideal moves in mind, she ironed out the mistakes.

Although bayonetship, being a form of fighting developed against humans, couldn't be applied to Stardust as it is, there was no way to get stronger but to train. After finishing her training with the wooden rifle, she'd take up an ordinary rifle and start the shooting practice. After spending around 3 hours on jogging, bayonetship and shooting practice, Mebuki would return to the Tower for breakfast.

But today, the priestess stood in front of the Tower's entrance.

"I have something to report to all of you before breakfast. Head to the viewing platform. The rest of the members is already there".

"Without having the time to change?"

"It won't be a problem. It's a short announcement that will take up just a few minutes".

Mebuki, still in her training clothes, ascended to the viewing platform with the priestess. The rest of the sentinels was assembled on the viewing platform, but the two who said they wished to be relieved of their duties weren't there. In return, there were four unfamiliar girls present.

"From today, these girls will be newly assuming the duties of sentinels", - said the priestess. They were told that these four girls will be using the empty rooms at the Tower. Those rooms were the ones used by the two girls with heavy injuries and the two girls who wanted to quit. Apparently, they were already considered "empty rooms". Mebuki remembered the priestess words about "replacement" from the previous day.

(So we're... expendable, huh.)

Parts that could be replaced indefinitely. If they wore out, they'd be thrown out and changed for a new one right away. The separate parts didn't even need names. Nobody would look at the thrown out garbage anyway.

"Waah, Mebu

~!" - Kagajou Suzume was clinging to Mebuki with tears in the classroom.

"I should've said I wanted to stop doing this too! The girls that just left the Tower, they were let away so easily, so I'm leaving too! I give up, give up, it's time to give up!"

Ignoring the wailing Suzume, Mebuki took out her textbook from the bag and started preparing for their first period lesson. The sentinels still received some lessons. For that purpose, a classroom was made in the training facility. Was it to allow them to be able to return to normal life, seeing as they could become worthless anytime? Or was it so the Taisha could pretend they're "treating the sentinels as normal people"?

Although Suzume's wailing and crying right from the morning should've warranted notice from someone, the rest of the girls ignored her just like Mebuki. The sight of Suzume crying on Mebuki's shoulder has become as routine as a pebble on a road.

"Suzume, I've told you many times. You have ample power. I won't let you say you're giving up".

"But, but the girls who left were better than me at training!"

"Training is just that, training. You were much better when push came to shove".

Suzume both had low self-esteem and wasn't rated well by the Taisha, but Mebuki recognised her abilities. During their first sortie outside, Suzume reliably fulfilled her role. Alongside the many wounded, she was coming back, bawling and unharmed.

"Suzume, you should believe in yourself more".

"I don't believe in myself at all!"

"Well then why didn't you say you wanted to quit the sentinels?"

"Uu... that's... O-okay, I'll say it! I'll tell them I want to quit the sentinels! I'll tell that priestess! I'll say it, I'll definitely say it! Gubbai, Gold Tower!"

"Sure, sure".

"...uwah, it's too scary to say, after all! They'll kill me! That priestess, she's wearing a mask, but it's like she's always staring at you with a cold gaze! That person, she's totally a robot or something! In the first place, does she even ever remove that mask!?"

"...who knows..."

Ever since Mebuki became a hero candidate, she's never seen that priestess remove her mask. Despite being a teacher in addition to being a priestess, she kept her mask on even during class. She was more thorough in concealing her face than any other priests... Was there some kind of reason for that?

"If you remove her mask, there's totally gonna be a robotic face under it".

"Kagajou-san, please take your seat" - interrupting Suzume's words, the priestess entered the classroom.

"Eeek! Y-yes! I'll sit down right away! I didn't say anything about robot priests or quitting the sentinels!"

Suzume dashed to her seat like a startled hare.

"Well then, open your textbooks on page 156".

The priestess stood up and emotionlessly began the lesson. Just like in the past, she also fulfilled the role of the sentinels' teacher. And, as expected, she did it with her mask still on. While listening to the lesson, Mebuki looked around the classroom.

The four new sentinels were sitting pale-faced with sunken heads. They must've been told the truth of the world outside the wall and their mission.

But seeing it with one's own eyes was far more taxing than just hearing it. Would those girls be able to handle their first experience beyond the wall? Out of the people currently in the classroom, how many would remain at the very end?

In the first place, would there even be an end to the sentinels' duties? (No, I'll make it end. I won't be stuck in this place forever!)

After the lesson, they had training until noon. Based on the data obtained from the previous sortie, the sentinels' movements were being improved.

The biggest issue were the sentinels wielding shields. Although the shields were capable of protecting against the attacks of the Stardust, their tenacity was out of this world. Under the repeated group attacks of the Stardust, the sentinels' shields broke faster than expected. Improvement of the protectors' physical abilities, as well as battle formations and a way of fighting that wouldn't allow the Stardust to concentrate their attacks were the core of their training.

Lunch took place in the mess room inside the Tower. It was the system where you could order what you liked. Lately, even amongst the sentinels there started appearing groups of people who got along better with each other. In that regard, at least, they were no different than ordinary schoolgirls.

Mebuki was eating alone when Suzume came and brought her own food to the table.

"Uuu, I wonder when our next mission is going to be... I'm gonna die next time, I definitely am".

"You won't die. Nobody in my squad will die".

"Aah, Mebu, you're so reliable! Mebu, you're my god! You've gotta protect me on our next mission too, absolutely! It's a promise, hear me? Promise! If they break through, I'll die, you know!"

Suzume kept clinging to Mebuki. While her pessimism was a problem, it didn't feel bad to be relied upon.

"My, my. There are certainly some noisy people around here. A meal is something that should be taken with a little more grace and elegance".

The one who appeared, saying that, was a third year student, Miroku Yumiko. She also brought her food and sat down at Mebuki's table.

"For certain, during our next mission, I, Miroku Yumiko, shall..."

"Suzume, you keep saying you'll die, but I didn't protect you even once when we were outside the wall. You survived thanks to your own strength".

"Eeh, what now? What are you talking about, Mebu, you kept protecting me all that time, didn't you?"

"Suzume, just what kind of memory alternation is happening inside your head..."

"My apologies, but could you please not ignore my presence like this!?" With furrowed eyebrows, Yumiko leaned towards Mebuki.

"Ah. Sorry, Miroku-san. You said something to me, right? I didn't notice."

"!? Fu, fu, fu... A-as a member of the Miroku family, I must be lenient towards commoners. I am not that fickle to get angry at something like this..."

Her shoulders, however, were slightly trembling.

"Feel free to have that attitude while you still can. Next time, I shall defeat more Stardust than you, Mebuki-san, and make my superiority over you abundantly clear!"

"Miroku-san... our mission is investigation".

"Fufu, worry not. When I prevail over you and attain the rank of the commander, I shall make you my right hand, Mebuki-san. Consider that to be

an honour".

"..."

The talks were going nowhere.

"Getting along is fine, but fighting is a no-no, Mebuki-senpai, Miroku-senpai".

Kokudo Aya brought her meal to Mebuki's table as well. This first-year student was the only girl living in the tower who wasn't a sentinel. She was a miko, capable of receiving oracles from Shinju-sama.

"Me and Mebuki-san are worthy rivals! We are not getting along!"

"Fufu, looks to me like you're getting along just fine".

Aya's smile stopped Yumiko dead in her tracks. Resignedly, she sat down and started eating.

"By the way, Aya-chan, I didn't see you this morning, did something happen?" - Mebuki inquired out of curiosity, since Aya didn't appear during the morning lesson. The miko didn't take the sentinels' training, but she took the normal lessons together with everyone.

"Since there were those who just became sentinels, I was praying. So that those who became sentinels today and all of you who were already sentinels could safely fulfill your duties. I'm sorry, I should've told you since you're the captain, Mebuki-senpai".

"No, don't worry about it. I was just a little worried".

"Thank you. You're really kind, Mebuki-senpai" - smiled Aya.

"Nothing of the sort..."

Aya's the kind one, thought Mebuki.

The mikos were under strict control of the Taisha. They were completely forbidden to interact with ordinary people, and their contact with their family was restricted as well. Since they received oracles from Shinju-sama, they were involved with the very backbone of the state, and as such, inevitably came to know the state of the outside world and about Vertexes.

Mebuki didn't know at what age Aya manifested her special ability. But when

they first met, it was evident she underwent considerable mike training already. That meant she must've been living under the Taisha's control from quite a young age.

To know the cruel truth of the world since her youth, not being able to meet with her family at the most tender age. But Aya didn't warp, and is fulfilling her miko duties without a word of complaint. Pious and devoted to Shinju, she kept working herself to the bone for the sake of everyone around. Though Aya was younger, Mebuki held her in respect.

"Those who quit the sentinels must still certainly be under Shinju-sama's divine protection". It was evident from her face and tone that Aya was earnestly praying.

After that, Mebuki spotted Yamabushi Shizuku wandering around with her food tray. Not being able to find an empty seat, she looked troubled. Mebuki pointed to the chair next to hear, signaling that it was empty.

"Shizuku! If you can't find a place, how about coming here?"

Shizuku silently nodded, came and sat down next to Mebuki. And then, just as silently, started eating.

Because she was taciturn and expressionless, it was hard to figure out what she was thinking. But because she displayed outstanding decision-making during their activities, she caught Mebuki's eye. Shizuku's sentinel number was 9.

The numbers of the sentinels were assigned according to their abilities. Because numbers 1 through 8 were assigned to the officers, it meant that the Taisha recognised Shizuku's abilities as second only to them.

(Although, that's probably overestimating her...)

While Mebuki recognised her discernment and ability to follow orders, her combat and physical abilities were below average. She felt that "9" was a bit too high of a number for her.

Kusunoki Mebuki, Kagajou Suzume, Miroku Yumiko, Kokudo Aya, Yamabushi Shizuku. Those 5 frequently hanged out together, and were recognised as a single group by the others.

(What a weird feeling.)

Mebuki still wasn't used to this kind of situation. Ever since her hero candidate days, she was always alone. Not paying attention to any other people, she accomplished everything on her own. But now, partially because she became a commander, she started to interact with other people.

"I must say, today your meal is the same as it always is, Mebuki-san", - glanced Yumiko at Mebuki's food.

Mebuki's lunch menu consisted of udon, two boiled eggs, tofu, milk, yoghurt, chicken tenderloin and a heap of salad.

"Udon and milk, just what is this? How do you feel about changing milk to tea and udon to some bread?"

"I'm not that concerned with the taste of the combination. When it comes to nutrition, milk is unbeatable."

"...in that case, do you object to changing udon?"

"I can't change udon to bread. I've been eating this since I was born", - decisively said Mebuki.

"I like udon too".

Aya, just like Mebuki, often had udon for her meals.

"Indeed, Kagawa's udon is delicious. But I think it would be good to have something different for a change. It seems to me like your menu is always the same, Mebuki-san".

"If you take into account the proteins, vitamins and the mineral content, this is the best possible meal".

"... now that I think about it, Miyoshi Karin-san ate nothing but supplements and was completely unconcerned with the taste of her food as well... Both of the former top hero candidates have quite a weird shared trait."

"But Miroku-san, you say that, but don't you always eat skipjack tuna yourself?" - said Suzume, looking at Yumiko's tray.

"Fufun, not knowing the charm of skipjack tuna makes you lose out on half,

no, eighty percent of your life. The one served in this cafeteria is quite good indeed, but the real skipjack tuna from my home area of Kochi is simply delightful! Let us have some prepared right away. Alfred!" - Yumiko clapped her hands.

Nothing happened.

"It appears that Alfred, the butler, is on his leave. It is a shame, but I must show you the beauty of real skipjack tuna on some other occasion".

"No, there aren't any butlers here in the first place. The name sounds superfishy too", - Suzume was looking at Yumiko with eyes full of doubt.

"However, back at our home, when I happened to call out, Alfred would appear whenever and whenever".

"This rich girl backstory is getting more suspicious by the second..."

"It is not a backstory, Suzume-san! The Miroku family is a noble and distinguished one, and I would ask you not to insult it!"

"I respect them. Both the Miroku family and yourself, Miroku-senpai. I've heard a lot about the Miroku family that once helped save the world along with the Akamine family. And you yourself, senpai, have been selected by the Shinju-sama to serve the proud duty of a sentinel, a daughter your family can be proud of. That's amazing", - Aya eagerly showed her admiration.

Yumiko, deeply moved, hugged her.

"Aah, Kokudo-san, what a wonderful girl you are! You and you alone understand me!"

Aya, though embarassed, let her do as she pleased.

"Well, that aside... I get the feeling of wanting to give others tasty things from your hometown. I'd like to give you some orange juice from mine", - said Suzume while eating her mandarin for dessert.



"Suzume, you were from Ehime, were you not?"

"Yep. But ya know, while we're at it, I wonder why I was chosen as a sentinel?.. Ehime's got the most people in Shikoku, there's gotta have been people more capable than me..."

Suzume lay flat on the table.

"Me and Aya-chan are both from Kagawa, Miroku-san is from Kochi, Suzume is from Ehime. Scattered around, eh."

In response to Mebuki's words, a serious expression appeared on Yumiko's face.

"In that case... there is but one thing to do".

"What do you mean?"

"Most! Obviously! To hold a contest to prove what prefecture is superior! Alas, Kochi being the best is a foregone conclusion. With the biggest area and overflowing greenery! Where the skipjack tuna trade starts! Indeed, historically Kochi, in other words, the Tosa domain is a renowned place. And, above all other virtues, the Miroku family resides in Kochi!"

Yumiko's words lit a fire of competitiveness inside Mebuki's soul.

"Kagawa isn't going to lose. In terms of food, there's obviously udon, but wasanbon - high class sugar and honetsukidori are famous as well. If you talk about history, then the well-known Koubou-Daishi (The Grand Master Who Propagated the Buddhist Teaching) Kuukai was from Kagawa! Besides, Kagawa is the most urbanised prefecture on Shikoku. The prefectural office in Tamamo city is famous, isn't it?"

"...hold up, the most urbanised prefecture on Shikoku is Ehime. Our prefectural office is pretty great too! The population is the highest on Shikoku, and the Dougo onsen has a history of over 3000 years, it's even written down in the Kojiki! Ah, sorry, I got a bit too fired up. My bad", - Shizuku started bowing.

"...Yamabushi Shizuku-san! What do you have to say about your birthplace?"

Shizuku, who has been silently eating, tilted her head at Yumiko's words. After a silence like she forgot even the concept of words and was trying to

remember, she curtly said: "Tokushima".

"Hmph, we indeed are scattered around".

"Ahaha, you're right. It's kind of mysterious, having people from all over Shikoku gathered here", - Aya let out a soft smile.

"Indeed, while there is such an occasion, would you tell us more about yourself, Shizuku-san? I have been wanting to talk to you for quite a time, you see. What kind of family do you happen to be from? What about your parents?"

After a long sound of silence following Yumiko's question, Shizuku answered.

"They commited double suicide".

. . .

An uncomfortable silence settled on the table.

(What are you doing, Miroku-san! The atmosphere!) - glared Mebuki at Yumiko. She blatantly averted her eyes.

(It is not my fault! I did not happen to know!) - Mebuki could almost hear those words from her expression.

From another side, Suzume was staring at Mebuki with pleading eyes.

"Mebu, save us~! Do something about this atmosphere!" - read Suzume's eyes.

Mebuki started scrambling for a topic to talk about.

"Ha-have you lived in Tottori for all your life?"

To the question Mebuki finally thought of, Shizuku shook her head.

"I've been at Shinju-kan since elementary school".

Upon hearing that, Aya's eyes widened.

"The Shinju-kan! Thinking about it, weren't there heroes amongst the Shinju-kan students two years ago? Since you're around their age, Shizuku-senpai, did you maybe know them?" Shizuku nodded.

"They were in the next class".

"Haa~ That's kind of surprising. To think you knew heroes from our

generation", - Aya let out a sigh in admiration.

Mebuki looked at Shizuku with serious eyes.

"What kind of people were they, current generation heroes? What kind of people could become heroes?"

She still didn't know. Why was it she wasn't chosen to be one? Her grades in training didn't lose to Miyoshi Karin's. She had ample sense of responsibility for the duty of a hero as well. But Mebuki wasn't the one chosen. What was different between her and a hero - Mebuki wanted to know that. Then, the bell rang for the afternoon training. In the end, she didn't hear an answer from Shizuku.

The second investigation outside the barrier happened on the following day. The four new sentinels were given the bare minimum training on using their equipment and thrown straight into battle. Not giving them enough time to train properly, the Taisha must have been in a hurry. Was the end of Shinju's lifespan approaching this close?

"We're going with a dense formation this time as well. The estimated time until our goal is 30 minutes. Everyone, try and hold out!"

At Mebuki's command, the sentinels stepped onto the festering land. Since their last mission was to gather soil from near the wall, there was no need to move away from its vicinity. However, this time their task was to go towards what was in the past era called the Chuugoku region, gather soil and report on the overall situation there. Even though the sentinels were nowhere as fast as the heroes, in a case there were no obstacles at all, even they could reach the Chuugoku region in the span of several minutes. However, since the obstacles in form of morbid and annoying monsters were there, it wouldn't be that easy.

"Gyaaa! They're here! Save me, Mebu

!!"

Suzume's desperate screams were an alert indicating that danger was approaching. A group of Stardust was closing in on the sentinels, moving through the scorching land huddled together. "Protector team, deploy shields!

Gunner team, odd numbers, engage the Stardust and ease the burden on the protectors! Even numbers, retreat behind the shields!"

The protector team enlarged their shields, covering the entire squad. The Stardust's attacks were stopped by the shield wall. Although their speed dropped, the squad kept continuing with the wall of shields deployed.

One half of the gunner team was outside the shield formation, eliminating the Stardust. From their last mission it was evident that relying only on the shields was certain to make the defence crumble eventually.

The mass-produced types' way of fighting was just like small fish gathering into schools to resemble bigger fish.

Mebuki was outside the shields, brandishing her bayoneted rifle and taking down the Stardust. (Even though our enemies are just Stardust, it's hard

The truly terrifying ones were the beings called Vertexes. Incomparably gigantic compared to the Stardust, those enemies possessed overwhelming power and stamina. Even the heroes, who were far stronger than the sentinels, had to struggle for their lives while fighting those. If they somehow came to face one of those enemies, the sentinels would have zero chance at victory. However, the Taisha predicted that shortly following the heroes' defeat of the twelve Vertexes, there wouldn't appear any more of them.

Taking injuries, the girls finally arrived at their destination. But the only thing to greet them there was, again, the endlessly spreading inflamed wasteland. Since the sentinels' battle suits had a function of recording images of their surroundings, they were to report all of the scenery surrounding them back to the Taisha.

"...what a horrible sight".

Mebuki's mood worsened. The heavenly gods who brought humanity to the brink of extinction, the land gods who didn't approve of Mebuki as a hero, all those so-called "gods" made her sick to death.

But there was no use in being angry now. The mission took priority. Mebuki kept protecting the rest of the squad while they were collecting the soil into their kagami.

"Commence retreat!"

After there was enough soil collected, at Mebuki's order the sentinels started retreating.

"Phew, huff, phew... Fufufu, our mission this time was an utterly easy one. It was so mundane, phew, phew, I nearly fell asleep..."

"You're totally out of breath though. And drenched in sweat".

"Oh hold your tongue, Suzume-san! Should I perhaps pluck a thousand or so hairs from your eyebrows and see if your face gets more interesting?"

"I-I'm sorry!"

"Miroku-san, stop throwing yourself at the Stardust without thinking already. If you're tired, it's fine to rest inside the shields."

Yumiko bluntly rejected Mebuki's words.

"I shall have to decline that. That way I could not continue striking down enemies and building my achievements up".

She was exhausted and wounded, but her eyes were still burning with fighting spirit.

"AAAAAH!"

"Suzume, what now?"

"There! There's... there's a whole lot of them gathering!"

Looking at the direction Suzume was pointing at, Mebuki saw a massive number of Stardust fusing together in the air.

It was one of the phenomena the priestess told them about. The Vertexes were formed by an aggregation of Stardust. While it was unlikely for a complete Vertex to show up, there was a possibility that an "partially evolved form" would appear.

Dozens of Stardust combined and took grotesque shape of a single being that resembled a horn. It was gigantic, incomparable to mere Stardust.

"What's that, what is that!? It'll kill, it's gonna kill us! Dad, mom, forgive me for the sin of dying before youuu!" - Suzume was weeping while clinging to

Mebuki.

The combined being was approaching the rear of the retreating sentinel squad. Shizuku was there.

The rear part of the squad noticed the approaching giant being, and one of the protector girls deployed her shield.

"Kyaaa!"

But she couldn't handle the overwhelming power of the giant, easily more than ten times larger than a Stardust, and was sent flying like a piece of paper. The imposing look and power of the massive creature drained the sentinels of their will to fight in a flash. They couldn't win. Nobody thought that a monster like this would appear. Some were paralysed with fear, some incontinent, some broke down into tears... Despair spread through the sentinels. Shizuku, as well, was astonished at the giant approaching her.

"...going to die?" - those words naturally spilled out of Shizuku's mouth.

Death. Altar. Coffin. Flower offerings. A girl lying on a flowerbed. Broken body. Can't move. Cold. Died while fulfilling the duty of a hero. A voice calling it an honour. A desk where nobody sits. A bouquet left. A name that won't be called anymore. A girl who was always bright. Who was always at the center of everyone. Who she admired.

Don't want to.

Don't want to die. What is dying?

Shizuku opened her eyes.

"Yamabushi-san has a thin sense of self, and a quiet nature, but deep inside, another personality of hers dwells. A wild, violent and powerful one. A polar opposite of her normal self. It appears to come out when she's driven into a corner."

"So the reason she's number 9 is because her other personality was taken into account, then". The priestess nodded in response to Mebuki's question.

"In that state, Yamabushi-san has tremendous strength, but she's completely incapable of cooperating with other sentinels."

The reason the sentinels fulfilled their duty without a single casualty this time was because of the other Shizuku. Was it not for her, someone would've inevitable been killed. But after taking down the giant being, she didn't respond to Mebuki's orders at all. Away from the formation, she kept fighting the Stardust as she pleased. It looked like she took delight in fighting.

"That will pose a problem to completing the mission".

"Making the members abide is one of the commander's duties as well", - saying just that to Mebuki, the priestess turned around and left.

"The hell's up with your scared mug!"

"Eek! Shi-Shizuku-sama, my apologies!"

At dinner time in the sentinels' mess hall, Suzume and Shizuku were talking.

"Don't you -sama me! If you've got something to say, say it properly!"

"A-a-as if someone like me has the right to speak to you.... H-how long are you going to be like this, again?"

"I'm me, you got a problem with that, huh?"

"M-most certainly not!" - Suzume kneeled down before Shizuku.

"Suzume, you get scared too easily..."

Mebuki was getting tired of looking at their quarrel. But she couldn't just leave Shizuku alone in her current state.

Mebuki put her hand on Shizuku's shoulder.

"Can I have a moment?"

"Hm? What do you want?" - Shizuku turned around towards Mebuki.

"Me-Mebu~! You came to save me!"

Suzume quickly hid behind Mebuki's back.

Standing in front of Shizuku, Mebuki asked: "So, how long are you going to be in this state?"

"Who knows. Been a while since I was out, so I'll have some fun for now".

"... I see".

"Isn't it better for you too? I'm way stronger than that Shizuku. Let me go wild on the next mission too".

"You're right, your strength is definitely reliable."

"I know, right? But don't order me around. I'll do things how I want to-"

"But you're unnecessary to our squad right now".

"...huh?"

Shizuku's eyes became sharp. Without faltering, Mebuki endured that stare. Tension was rising between the two. The rest of the girls in the mess hall were also looking at Mebuki and Shizuku with anxious gazes.

Mebuki continued in a cold voice.

"The important thing for the sentinels is cooperation and the power of numbers. You acting by yourself is going to put the rest of the squad in danger. I'll have you abide my orders".

"...I'm not gonna be ordered around by someone who's weaker than me".

"Then I'll just have to force you to".

The two exited the Tower and headed towards the dojo in the training facility. If Mebuki won, Shizuku would have to follow her orders after that. If Shizuku won, she would be allowed to act free and not listen to anyone's commands. Under these rules, they decided to have a competition.

"Are you really okay? She's, like, crazy strong! Mebu, even you..."

"Indeed, today she happens to be almost as strong as me, Mebuki-san". - were saying Miroku and Suzume while looking at Shizuku doing warm-up exercises.

"No, Miroku-san, you're way weaker than her."

"Mebuki-san!? I merely have not stopped holding back yet!"

"In the first place, why are you here anyway?"

Suzume, Yumiko and Aya all came to the dojo.

"Everyone is worried about you two, so they came".

"Nothing of the sort, Kokudo-san! I came here merely out of curiosity!" - denied the flustered Yumiko.

"Anyway, Mebuki-senpai... Try to finish this without any injuries, okay?" - said Aya, looking into Mebuki's eyes.

"No need to worry. It's just to show that brute what the pecking order here is, after all". - letting out a composed smile, Mebuki looked at Shizuku.

Mebuki and Shizuku launched their apps and donned their battle suits. This time Mebuki was using a gunner suit rather than a commander one. Since Shizuku was a gunner, it was to level the playing field.

"You can put the commander suit on, you know. It'll be just the right handicap".

"Sorry, but I'm not going to give you any rights to make excuses. Like "I lost because your equipment was better"".

The two readied their bayoneted rifles and clashed.

Mebuki took the lead at first. She started off with a frontal stab going into a horizontal slash. But Shizuku easily dodged that attack and followed up with a downward diagonal swing of her bayonet.

"Take that!"

"Guh!.."

Mebuki stopped that attack with her barrel.

(It's heavy... Even if she's just leaving it to brute force, the speed and weight behind her attacks are formidable. And she's instinctively good at moving her joints and balance around... This kind of power is unthinkable, coming from her physique.)

Her movements were amateurish, but she had natural talent.

But Mebuki had no intention of losing. She knew she wasn't talented. But in return, she worked harder than anyone else and accumulated experience. Her repeated training made her stronger. Back then, they refused to make her a hero, but nobody could deny the strength she's built up. Mebuki and Shizuku's blades kept crossing.

Suzume was overwhelmed by the sight of Mebuki and Shizuku. She was a shield user, but she's seen mock battles of the rifle users multiple times. But the fight between Mebuki and Shizuku was something else entirely.

"Amazing..."

"Indeed, you are right".

Yumiko's eyes were glued to the two as well. Where she would've normally went: "Not bad indeed. As expected of my rival", - she kept quiet, mesmerized by the strength of the two.

Aya, as well, just silently looked at the two girls engaged in combat.

Mebuki stopped Shizuku's sideways slash. Their lines of sight crossed.

"You've got guts, aren'tcha? It's like you're telling yourself you can't lose no matter what! What's your reason for fighting to this extent anyway?!"

"[..."

Mebuki looked straight at Shizuku, and spilled her heart out.

"I'll become a hero! I'll force the Taisha and the Shinju-sama to admit I'm qualified to be one! For that, the duty of a sentinel, the post of the commander, I'll fulfill them all perfectly! And if you get in my way, I'll break you in and force you to abide! Everything is to become a hero!"

"Hero. A hero, huh!"

Mebuki brandished her rifle with brute force and closed the distance to Mebuki.

"Two years ago, I've seen those heroes from up close! I've seen one of them dead!"

Washio Sumi. Nogi Sonoko. Minowa Gin. The three heroes of Shinju-kan. And out of them, Minowa Gin lost her life.

"I say that, but I've never seen those heroes fight anyway. The only thing I know is their normal school selves".

Shizuku's heard that those girls were someone tasked with a special duty. But she had no idea what exactly that duty was.

That's why...

When the sudden news of Minowa Gin's death came, Shizuku was mortified.

While recovering her breath, Mebuki kept listening to Shizuku.

"Kusunoki. You've asked early what kind of people the heroes were, right? As far as I, from the neighbouring class, know, they were a bunch of weirdoes.

There was one called Washio Sumi. She had a stick up her ass and was awkward, but it looked like she was always looking out for her friends.

There was one called Nogi Sonoko. She lived at her own pace and basically did nothing but sleep, but could do almost anything when she got serious. Well, she only got serious when it came to her buddies anyway.

There was one called Minowa Gin. She was a restless troublemaker, I hear, but considerate towards other people and her friends."

Two years ago. When she went to Shinju-kan, the three heroes who were in the same grade... At the time, Shizuku had troubles talking to people. With no one to call a friend, she lived an isolated life.

It was then she heard a rumour that there are special people called "heroes" in the next class. Shizuku went to check those girls out. She only wanted to peek from behind the door, but was found by Minowa Gin who started talking to her. She was talking to Shizuku, who barely spoke to people, without making fun of her, just like a friend.

Shizuku admired Gin. Not because she was a hero. It was because she was an amiable, bright girl who would get along with anyone and look out for her friends and family. She could do sports and say what she thought clearly, a cool girl.

"You know, they weren't as fanatical as you are. They lived a normal life. They went to school, took lessons, ate food, played with their friends... They were just like normal kids you'd find anywhere! Before becoming them, they didn't whine they wanted to become heroes either".

"Then why? Are you saying that the condition for becoming a hero was to live a normal life!?" - Mebuki asked. She thought that to become a special being like

a hero, living a normal life wasn't possible. That's why she discarded everything unnecessary and honed herself to a razor edge. And almost everything "normal" went that way

Shizuku leapt forward.

"Could never become a hero!"

Crossing the distance between them in a flash, Shizuku lunged at Mebuki. There was no time to dodge.

Mebuki, using her rifle as a shield, blocked Shizuku's stab. If she made the slightest mistake in the angle or her movements, Shizuku's bayonet would've slide right along the rifle's surface and hit Mebuki. It was a move that would've been impossible without Mebuki's trained spatial awareness, reflexes, and her ability to feel the rifle as a part of her own arm, born from many thousands of stabs she performed. But the power of Shizuku's stab threw Mebuki back.

"Got you!"

Without a moment's respite, Shizuku lunged once again.

"Even so... I'll become a hero!"

Mebuki, without retreating, kicked off the floor and leapt forward. Shizuku's blade left a shallow horizontal cut on her chest. But at the same time, Mebuki locked Shizuku's blade in her armpit.

"...caught you. You can't move now"

"Tch!?"

Shizuku released the rifle right away and tried getting away from Mebuki. But Mebuki was faster in pointing her bayonet at Shizuku's neck.

"The win is mine".

"..." - Shizuku, held at the point of a bayonet, was glaring at Mebuki.

"My loss".

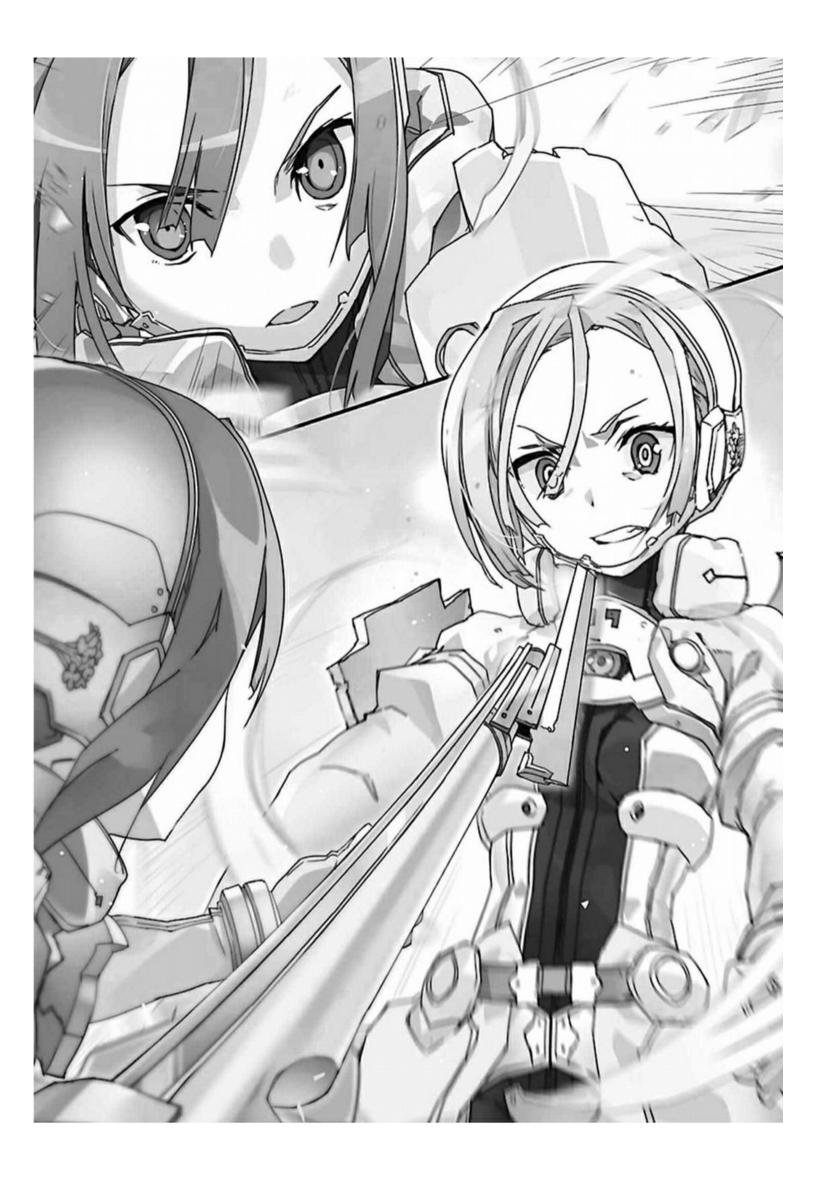
Hearing that, Mebuki lowered her rifle.

"And now you're in my hands. From now on, you'll be abiding by my orders".

"I got it, that's what we agreed on. Aah, I lost, huh".

Shizuku removed her battle suit and plunked down on the floor. Mebuki followed suit, removed her weapons and sat down.

"I've gotta say, you're a crazy one. Who would even leap forward in that situation?"



"It was a bet. Just like stopping your stab with my barrel and catching your second stab, those were all miracles".

"Those were no miracles. You're just that strong".

"You were better than I expected too".

Mebuki and Shizuku exchanged glances. Satisfied smiles appeared on the faces of both.

"Whining about wanting to become a hero, huh... I guess it's just like you said".

"Whoa, what's that? Did you get enlightened all of a sudden?"

"As if I'm someone who could achieve that. It's true, your words did startle me a little... Even so, I'm not going to change my way of life. I don't think there's anything wrong with recklessly striving to be a hero".

It was because that was her respected father's way of life. Mebuki wouldn't allow anyone to deny her the way she lived her life. And for that, she would grasp the position of a hero with her own strength.

"I will continue to aim to be a hero. I will achieve so much the Taisha will have no choice but to make me one. If the other think it's impossible, so be it. I'll show them all".

"...now that's some determination. You're an interesting one, you know", - Shizuku said as if dumbfounded, but with enjoyment in her voice.

"I think so as well. Mebuki-senpai, there's no need to deny yourself. Your complete devotion to your goal is your virtue", - Aya said, coming next to Mebuki. There was no trace of irony or sarcasm in her voice.

"Aya-chan..."

"I really like that part of you, Mebuki-senpai".

"...thanks".

Mebuki averted her eyes. She felt really embarassed for some reason.

"What's up with you? I was talking with Mebuki right now, don't butt in", - Shizuku was directing a powerful stare at Aya, who cut in from the side.

But the youthful-looking girl, without showing even a bit of fear, continued: "I was looking at you two and somehow just wanted to join in".

"...you've got some serious guts. You're a miko, right? Aren't you afraid when someone stronger threatens you?"

"I'm not scared at all. Your tone is rude, but I know you're definitely a good person".

"Huh?" - Shizuku's expression became puzzled.

"Even if not a hero, the fact you became a hero means Shinju-sama chose you. The calm and quiet Shizuku-senpai and the strong and reliable you. If either of you were bad people, Shinju-sama could not have possibly chosen you. That's why you're definitely a good person. And the sentinels' safe return last time was undoubtedly thanks to you. Thank you very much", - deeply bowed Aya.

Shizuku's face was blank, but then a faint smile appeared in the corner of her mouth.

"Eeh, what a softie. That Suzume kept shivering when talking to me".

"Huh? That's right, where are Suzume and Miroku-san?"

Mebuki looked around the dojo. At some point, the figures of Suzume and Yumiko disappeared from it.

"Aah, those two left. Suzume-senpai was so surprised by the power of you two, she decided to "leave before she got involved in this". Miroku-senpai didn't say anything, but she had a frustrated look on her face".

"I see..."

"More importantly, that means the two of you are friends now. Try to get along".

Aya joined Mebuki and Shizuku's hands together.

"...hmph".

Shizuku, somehow embarassed, turned her head away. Seeing the two like that, Mebuki let out a laugh. Her heart was bright. How long has it been since

she last felt anything like that? Was it the feeling of accomplishment after fighting Shizuku with all her might, or was it the feeling of satisfaction after having spoken her heart out? Today, for the first time in a while, she felt like she could get a good night's sleep.

(Chapter 2, end)





## Chapter 3 - A strong wind knows a sturdy weed

That night, Kagajou Suzume was in Kusunoki Mebuki's room, clinging to her and crying.

"Thank you, Mebuuu~! I'm alive thanks to you, you know~! You really are my hero, Mebuuu~!"

"Just look at you, trying to sweet-talk me like that", - while her voice sounded annoyed, her expression was somewhat soft.

The topmost amongst the sentinels - Mebuki, and the bottommost - Suzume. The strong-willed Mebuki and the pessimistic Suzume. They couldn't be resemble each other any less. Their relationship was hard to understand to a bystander. The origin of their strange relationship can be largely attributed to Suzume's personality.

When she was little, Suzume could never play on the swings. When the rest of the kids her age were happily playing on it in the park, Suzume could only look at them and think.

"...how can they do something this scary? What if, while hanging on, they happen to fall off? What if the metal part they're holding to breaks? What if the plank they're sitting on breaks?" - imagining such things, she became scared, and couldn't get on it. Suzume always imagined the worst possible outcome.

When going up a tall building, she imagined making a mistake and falling down from it.

When going to an attraction, she imagined it breaking down and dying in an accident.

When catching a light cold, she imagined it growing worse and ending lethally.

When going to a hospital, she imagined dying due to a medical error.

And Suzume really hated scary and painful things.

When getting an injection, she'd almost start crying from the pain.

When down with a cold, she cursed the world for thrusting such a horrible fate upon her. And then, imagining her own death, she'd start crying.

(Why am I such a coward?)

Suzume was a coward when it came to other people as well.

When she saw scary people, she'd be afraid of getting bullied by them.

That's why, through kindergarten and grade school, she always tried to get protected by the people she saw as high up in the hierarchy.

Lame. Pathetic. A bootlicker. She was well aware she was called that. She didn't care. That was the best way of survival. It was much better than getting bullied or hit.

She was well-aware of her own lameness. And she did not like

Having gone through kindergarten and grade school like that, the reason Suzume joined a student association in middle school was, naturally, to find protection for herself. The president of it was the prettiest of the 3rd years, good at studies and from a good family - she was on top of the hierarchy amongst the female students. When she invited Suzume to that association, Suzume saw her as the best possible support for herself, and agreed immediately.

There were four more members in that association. It didn't have any particular activities, they just lazed around and chattered after school. For Suzume, it was a cradle of happiness, with no signs of danger or scary people around. But she couldn't understand why the president even created such an association, and what was its reason for existence.

And then, when the summer of her 2nd year in middle school was approaching, the president said: "Today, we're disbanding the association".

It was a bolt from the blue. Suzume was shaken. She desperately tried to stop the association from being disbanded. If it was gone, then Suzume would lose her pillar of support. Answering Suzume's desperate clamours, the president said with slight sadness in her tone: "There's no reason for it to exist anymore". But even then, Suzume's desperate struggle continued. In face of her tenacity, the president had no choice but to give in and reveal Suzume, and Suzume alone the truth. The reason behind that club's existence.

It was created to gather people to fight the beings known as "Vertexes" invading Shikoku. Such groups were made all over Shikoku. When the Vertexes broke in, one of them would end up being chosen by the Shinju-sama, and its members would awaken as "heroes". It wasn't a story a normal person would believe, but Suzume, for whom imagining the worst possible outcome was natural, immediately accepted it as reality. The reason behing the association's existence that kept bugging her also became clear.

The Vertexes already invaded. Suzume and the rest of her group were not chosen by Shinju-sama. Thus, the group outlived its purpose.

Suzume shuddered. If she was selected to be a hero, it'd mean being given a dangerous duty. She could've died as a result.

Suzume felt resentment towards the president. Resentment for thrusting them into such danger without them knowing at all.

But she was soon to notice how misplaced that grudge was. Suzume joined with an ulterior motive of her own, after all. She was facing the president, who protected her for all that time, with resentment, however small it might've been. Suzume felt disgusted with herself.

Being a coward, she thought to herself: "Just why am I such a coward?"

And several months later, Suzume, recognised as a coward both by herself and other people, somehow ended up being given the dangerous duty of a sentinel.

The number Suzume was given amongst the sentinels was "32". Which is to say, she was evaluated as the single weakest member of the entire sentinel grup by the Taisha. Suzume herself agreed with that ranking. The Taisha considered the possibility of her dropping out during the very first mission rather high, but she did not, and was in the middle of the sentinels' fifth sortie beyond the wall.

"Gyaaaaah!! What's that? No way no way I'll die it'll kill meeeeee!" - Suzume's wails resounded through the scorching land.

Her screams at the attacks of Stardust were a common occurrence, but this time they were not facing Stardust. A countless number of them gathered together, and gave birth to a gigantic, grotesque figure.

Mebuki recognised that shape.

"Sagittarius Vertex..."

The enemies of mankind Taisha told them about. The enemies the heroes were facing. The messengers of the heavens, bearing the names of the 12 constellations. It was one of them, named after the Sagittarius.

The priests told them that the Vertexes would not appear. However, they were told than an imperfect form of them could possibly appear. They looked exactly the same, but the incomplete ones lacked the so-called "core". They were significantly weaker than the perfect Vertexes that possessed a core, but they were still enemies far beyond the sentinels' reach.

Without a moment of faltering, Mebuki called out to all members: "Halt the sample gathering! Commence retreat immediately!"

The sentinels who were busy gathering soil stopped their work and started moving.

"Gunner squad, take aim! Fire!"

The rifle-bearing sentinels unleashed a volley towards a Stardust group. One by one, they were getting exterminated.

"No matter how many of those weaklings come, they do not pose even the slightest threat to Miroku Yumiko! Mebuki-san, I propose a forceful breakthrough!" - said Yumiko with confidence while taking down the Stardust.

However, Suzume wailed out: "Wait wait! There's no way we can break through here, no way! There's too many of the Stardust, we'll all die!"

"Then what else? The Sagittarius-alike right behind us is far more dangerous than Stardust, numerous as they might be!"

Behind them, the Sagittarius Vertex-like being was being formed. Sagittarius

possessed two ways of attacking. Attacking with small arrows that rained down in countless numbers and shooting one massive arrow. Either of those would be lethal for a sentinel.

And then, the sentinels were encircled by countless Stardust.

"Stardust in front and Sagittarius in the back! Aaagh, I hate this, I'm gonna die, totally gonna die! If we move we'll die, if we stop we'll die tooooo!" - the wailing Suzume slumped down onto the ground.

"Do you desire to die a pointless death? Get up right this instant and get going!"

Yumiko started dragging the sitting Suzume up.

Mebuki, however, stopped her.

"No, wait a little, Miroku-san. We're completely surrounded right now, we won't be able to evacuate in time. Suzume's correct. We should stay here."

"Eeh?! Mebuki-san, what might you be saying now? We shall all get slaughtered here..."

"Protector squad, deploy shields! Prepare for an arrow volley from Sagittarius!"

At Mebuki's order, the sentinels enlarged their shields and linked them together.

"Waaaaah, I'm scared, scared!"

Suzume, who has been sitting on the ground, got up as well and put her shield in a formation with those of the rest. The sentinel squad got completely enveloped by a wall of shields.

Right afterwards, the finished Sagittarius Vertex-alike unleashed a rain of countless arrows. Their numbers and speed made then resemblant less arrows, and more machine gun bullets. The protector sentinels were gritting their teeth and holding down the downpour of attacks.

As the countless arrows struck the shield's surface, they produced a terrifying sound that rang through the interior of the shield wall. That sound invoked terror amongst the sentinels. If the shields gave in to the attack, the sentinels

would get wiped out.

Eventually, the sound of arrows stopped. The enemy's attack must have stopped as well.

The girls breathed a sigh of relief.

"Gyaaaaaah! No way, no way, I don't wanna die!"

All of a sudden, Suzume disjointed her shield from the wall, and jumped outside it.

"Suzume-san? Just what might you be doing?!" - yelled Yumiko. The sentinels thought if Suzume went insane from the terror.

But they were wrong.

Outside of the shield wall, Suzume deployed her shield again.

The following moment Sagittarius released an arrow tens of times larger than before at the sentinels.

"Waaaaah! If we take that on, we're dead for suuuure!"

Suzume's shrieking coincided with the arrow making contact with the shield. The shields of the sentinels could not possibly defend against such a gigantic arrow. But Suzume didn't take it head on. Positioned at an angle, her shield deflected the arrow's destructive power.

Unlike the small arrows, the large ones couldn't be fired continuously.

"Protector squad, retract shields! Run with all your strength!"

At Mebuki's order, the protector sentinels returned their shields to their normal size and took the shield wall down.

Without anyone noticing, the amount of Stardust surrounding the sentinels dropped significantly. They could make a forceful breakthrough now. The girls started running towards the wall.

"Just why did their numbers fall?".

Running along, Mebuki answered Yumiko: "It's Sagittarius's arrows! It ended up shooting the Stardust down as well! They gathered to kill us themselves in the first place!"

Right after that, Sagittarius shot out a second gigantic arrow.

"Gyaaaaah! Save me!" - screaming, Suzume once again used the shield to avert it. The arrow, having changed its direction, flew off into a Stardust group, killing them all.

(Not just protecting from that arrow, but using it to take down other enemies... No, Suzume probably didn't plan on that. But even if instinctively, Suzume found the ideal way out.)

Mebuki believed in Kagajou Suzume's sharpness when it came to finding a way of staying alive. So this time, as well, she relied on her suggestions.

The sentinels continued running towards the wall for their dear life. This time, as well, there were a few wounded people, but the number of casualties was zero.

That night, while they were having dinner at the mess hall of the Gold Tower, Aya said with a serious face: "Mebuki-senpai. It's really amazing how little injuries the sentinels received."

As usual, Mebuki, Yumiko, Suzume, Shizuku and Aya gathered together to eat.

"Thanks, Aya-chan. But we brought back a pretty small amount of soil samples this time around."

"You brought back enough to analyse. And more important than the results of your harvesting is the fact nobody died", - said Aya, with her eyes glistening as if saying "That's wonderful!".

Shizuku lightly tugged on Mebuki's sleeve.

"What's wrong, Shizuku?"

"..." - Shizuku silently lowered her head.

"What are you suddenly apologising for?"

"...couldn't change over. Sorry..."

The Shizuku this time wasn't the ferocious SHIZUKU that appeared in the middle of their second mission, but the normal silent, expressionless Shizuku. SHIZUKU was much stronger in combat, but it's not as if she could change

personalities at will.

"Don't worry about that. Coming up with the best tactics according to what personnel they have is the duty of a commander. If it's you, Shizuku, then I have to consider that. If it was the other SHIZUKU, then I'd have to think of tactics that would use her".

But Shizuku shook her head.

"...I caused you trouble, Kusunoki..."

Aya grasped Shizuku's hands.

"Are you worried about that? But Shizuku-senpai, you were great! You brought back the highest amount of samples!"

"..."

At hearing Aya's words, Shizuku slightly bowed her head. It was her way of expressing gratitude.

Looking at them, Mebuki nodded as well.

"For that mission, it was better than it was you, Shizuku. If it was the other SHIZUKU, she'd probably rush at Sagittarius and gotten herself heavily wounded".

Even though SHIZUKU agreed to follow Mebuki's orders, she was still hard to control.

"Haah... But you know, Mebu, it's great you ordered retreat so quickly. If we fought there, we'd deeefinitely die." - Suzume sighed while, as usual, eating a mandarin.

"Well, if Mebuki-san did not order us to retreat, then I would have simply carved that so-called Sagittarius into pieces and added one more to the numerous achievements of the Miroku family".

"No way" - said Suzume.

"Yeah, impossible" - agreed Mebuki.

"..." - s "..." - silently shook her head Shizuku.

"Everyone, you are far too untrusting! Have I went all-out, that porcupinefish

would not have stood a chance!"

"A battle is a thing of luck. Miroku-senpai, maybe you would've won after all. But right now, we should offer our thanks to Shinju-sama for everyone being safe. It must have been thanks to its divine protection".

Aya turned towards the shrine in the mess hall and lowered her head.

"In fact, you are much more successful than we expected".

After the meal, Mebuki came into the priestess' room to deliver her regular report. The priestess was inputting the information into her notebook PC and spoke with a disinterested tone: "Zero casualties so far, and following the second mission, no heavy injuries either. We assumed there would be need for more replacement members".

"That's right, isn't it. This sentinel system was made with the premise of easily exchangeable members, right?"

Seeing how fast the replacements after their first mission came, it was an easy conclusion to come to. In case any more people dropped out, their replacements were probably already decided upon.

"Yes, that's correct" - the priestess answered Mebuki's question without hesitation.

"But for us Taisha, the fact there is little need for replacements is desirable. There is not enough time to train the new sentinels, and thus a high possibility they won't be able to accomplish their missions. We highly value you accomplishing the missions without casualties."

The priestess only cared about the completion of their missions. In the case a replacement would be needed, she would pay no heed to the victims that occurred.

"In my squad, not a single person will die. This is a vow I've made to myself", - said Mebuki, staring at the prestess.

The devout Aya said their lack of casualties was thanks to "Shinju's divine protection", but Mebuki didn't think so. It was a fruit of Mebuki's own tenacity.

"Your vow as a commander?"

"My vow as a human. During the Christian era, and two years ago there were casualties amongst the heroes, weren't there? The messengers of heavenly gods? Mankind's natural enemy? As if I care! We have to bring the age of humans being slaughtered by those monsters to an end!"

The time when humans would have to be the victims of the gods was over. She would make it end.

That's why Mebuki swore that she would not allow a single casualty to happen in her squad.

The priestess did not indicate whether she was listening to Mebuki, and kept typing on her computer's keyboard, then said indifferently: "If your report is over, then you're free to leave".

After exiting the priestess' room and heading towards her own, Mebuki bumped into two sentinel girls. Those two were friends and were commonly seen together.

"Ah, Kusunoki-san. Are you back from training?"

"No, I was making a report to the priestess. I'm going to be training now."

"Woah, now? Kusunoki-san, gotta respect your exercise-mindedness. That's our commander!"

"Exercise-mindedness?.."

Mebuki made a puzzled expression, but the two paid no attention and continued.

"Say, Kusunoki-san, you were one of the candidates to inherit a terminal of a previous hero, right?"

"Yes, that's right".

"We two are from the unpicked hero groups. We've never seen the real ones. But one of the candidates became one, right? Uuh... Miyoshi Karin-san, was it?

....

Miyoshi Karin. Just hearing that name made Mebuki's heart uneasy.

As the time they spent together grew longer, the sentinels started getting

along and knowing more about each other. Since Mebuki particularly stood out as the commander, people began to find out she was acquainted with the hero Miyoshi Karin and constantly came to ask about her. The fact Shizuku personally knew the heroes of the previous generation, however, wasn't known outside of Mebuki's group. That's why all of the sentinels' curiosity about the heroes was directed at Mebuki alone.

"What kind of people was the hero? If she was picked by Shinju-sama, she must've been an extraordinary fighter, right? With superhuman strength, a body so hard a sword couldn't cut it, capable of crushing rocks with her fists and running faster than sound, right!"

"No no, strength isn't everything. She must've been overflowing with divinity and an aura of charisma! Her body would be glowing and she'd have a halo!"

Mebuki was lost for words at such an inhuman description. But to someone who's never seen one, it was probably not unusual to deify the being known as the hero.

"Miyoshi-san wasn't that different from us. Of course, she was strong, but in the limits of what a human can achieve. Her body wasn't glowing, she had no halo and I wouldn't say she was particularly charismatic either".

"Eeh... really?" - with disappointment on their faces asked the two.

"That's right. The heroes are normal people, no different from us".

And that was exactly what fueled Mebuki's ire. There was nothing special about Miyoshi Karin. Her training results were excellent, but Mebuki was the same in that regard. So why was Karin the one chosen to be a hero and not Mebuki? Mebuki still couldn't understand the selection criteria.

The following day, during the lunch break, another bunch of girls approached Mebuki's group to ask about Karin.

"Kusunoki-san, is it true that the hero was a normal person? She really wasn't a battle genius or had super powers?"

"It's true. She was good at fighting, of course, but comparable to me".

"Hmm... Alright", - with no look of conviction in their faces, the girls left.

And the day after, yet another group of girls came to her between training sessions.

"Say, Kusunoki-san, what kind of person was the hero Miyoshi Karin?"

"Not a superhuman, without superpowers, a normal person. Maybe a bit too taken with supplements and dried sardines, but a normal person."

After dinner, she was approached with a "What was the hero-"

"A normal person".

And thus, Mebuki kept being pestered with questions about Karin.

Having answered yet another group of girls who approached her during lunch break with "a normal person", Mebuki let out a sigh.

"Hey Mebu, you're pretty popular, aren't you?" - Suzume poked fun at her.

"I'm getting sick of this. How many times do I have to tell them the same thing?"

Aya let out a bitter smile.

"Not many people have seen the heroes, after all. Actually, I've never encountered them either, so I'm curious too".

"And you, Aya-chan?!"

"Ahaha, don't worry, Mebuki-senpai. I'm not going to bother you with that".

"Shall we listen to the magnificent history of the Miroku family instead then?" - leaned forward Yumiko. In her hands was a book titled "The 300-year history of the Miroku-family" - self-published, maybe?

"..." - Shizuku tugged on Yumiko's sleeve and shook her head.

"I ask that you do not just silently decline like that!"

"Miroku family's history aside, I'm sick of answering questions about Miyoshi Karin already. Maybe we should hang a poster in the mess hall. «Miyoshi-san was somewhat strong at fighting, is the type who does her studies during the last night and has a mania for supplements and dried sardines.»"

"Yeah, that person looked kinda strong, but didn't feel particularly "special" in

any way. If I didn't know she was a hero beforehand, I would've never believed it", - Suzume said somewhat nostalgically.

"...wait. Suzume, you've met Miyoshi-san?"

"Heheheh. You all have been listening to Mebu alone, but in fact... not just Miyoshi-san, I've met all of the current generation heroes!" - with slight elation, Suzume started talking.

Divine Era, year 300, June.

While the weather forecast said that the rainy season started and the amount of rainy days would improve, for the past few days the sun had been shining. Kagajou Suzume was being slightly rocked by the moving train. Outside the window, a scenery of fields and small huts was passing by.

She was skipping out on afternoon classes and was going from Ehime to the city of Sanshuu in Kagawa. The association president told her about the existence of heroes. Suzume felt indescribable relief about not being chosen for that dangerous duty. But why couldn't help but be curious about what people got selected for it.

(The heroes must be from some warrior race like the Amazons or have superpowers like manga characters... If I come at them from the front, they'll probably grab me and eat me. I mean, the president told me that the first generation heroes ate Stardust alive and a previous generation hero drank a Vertex...) She was planning to peek quietly, and not to get noticed. At the station she got off the train and arrived at the Sanshuu middle school. The president told her that this was the place where the chosen 5 were.

The lessons just ended, and the students were coming out of the gates one after another. She couldn't let them notice she came to probe for info on the heroes. If she got caught, they'd probably drag her to them. "Venerable heroes, today we offer you this seedy-looking girl as your meal", or something like that. Timidly, Suzume approached on the girls who exited the gates and asked her: "Aaaah... I'm sorry... Might you know where miss Inubouzaki Fuu might be, by any chance? A-a-and miss Tougou Mimori, miss Yuuki Yuuna, miss Inubouzaki Itsuki and miss Miyoshi Karin..."

Suzume was quivering like a phone in vibration mode.

```
"Aah, you mean the girls from the hero club?"
"...eh?"
```

Suzume was dumbfounded. There was no trace of veneration in the girl's voice. As if she was talking about some ordinary people.

"Hm, they usually have work all around, so I don't know, try their clubroom maybe?" - the female student informed her about the place that sounded like the heroes' hideout, and then went away with a smile.

(Hold on, this must be a trap!)

That girl's relaxed attitude had Suzume calm down a little, but she immediately regained her vigilance. It must've been a plan to make her go soft, go into their shady hideout and be eaten right there.

(It's a trap, just like carnivorous plants or an antlion pit! I have to stay cautious!) Standing in front of the "Hero club clubroom" she was told about, Suzume was on full alert, and peeked in the crack in the doorway. The room was long, and the view to the inside of it was closed off by bookshelves. Further in, she could hear several people talking.

"Alright, we've got a lot of requests today. Let's show our full girl power and finish them all!"

```
"Yes!"

"Got it!"

"Sure!"

"Fine, I need to keep observing you people, so I'll help out".

"You keep saying that, Karin, but you're pretty used to this already~!"

"Shut up! Don't get buddy-buddy with me, it's annoying!"
```

"Alright, request number one, helping out with the gardening club's flowerbed! Yuuna, Itsuki, you're on that".

```
"Leave it to me!"
"Got it, Sis!"
```

"Next up, a request from the library staff. Helping out to fill the book checkout data into the database and sorting it out. Tougou, that one is on you".

"Literary knowledge is the cornerstone of the country! I will apply myself in earnest!"

"And the last one, from a student. She found a kitten on the way home, brought it to school but it ran away... So we need to find it, then try and find it a new owner. Karin, you're going with me for that one".

"Geh, with you?"

"As the club president, it's my responsibility to show the newbies the ropes, you know~"

"Hmph. Whatever, fine".

After that, the girls headed towards the exit while chatting along.

(So those are the heroes... They really don't look that different from normal people. No, this must be camouflage! Anyway, I've gotta hide for now!)

Suzume moved away from the door and hid behind a corner down the hallway.

Following that, Suzume pursued the heroes. First of all, she trailed the two that headed towards the courtyard. After reaching the flowerbed, they started talking to the people in front of it, who must've been the gardening club members.

"Yuuki Yuuna, from the hero club! We'll be helping out today!"

"Um, I'm Inubouzaki Itsuki. Nice to meet you".

The two heroes greeted the gardening club members.

Suzume hid in the shadows of the trees, took our a pair of binoculars and started observing the situation.

(What are they doing? Oh, maybe those gardening club members are the heroes' slaves and are being forced to grow food for them? In a harsh environment, forced to work until they lose consciousness...) While Suzume was imagining that, the gardening club girls were casually talking to the heroes.

"Thanks for coming to help us. Let's start weeding right away".

After the gardening club members said that, the two heroes nodded and started weeding the flowerbed.

(W-whaaaaaaaat!? Aren't the heroes being put to work here?)

Suzume was at a complete loss. Was the gardening club above the heroes in this school? Just what kind of hierarchy did it have?

After that, Suzume headed towards the library. She peeked through the gap in the doorway.

A girl in a wheelchair was there. She probably had disabled legs. Was that maybe a wound from fighting the Vertex? That'd make her a disabled veteran.

She was typing on the computer's keyboard with frightening speed, and beside her were the girls she assumed to be the library staff, holding checkout cards.

"Tougou-san, take care of these next, please. I've sorted them by year and gender."

"Leave it to me, please!" - the hero gave a sharp salute.

Suzume's head was filled with questions. (Are even the librarians higher than the heroes at this school?)

Suzume went to look for the remaining two - Inubouzaki Fuu and Miyoshi Karin. Since they kept moving about, even finding them was problematic. While wary of other students' eyes, Suzume kept trailing the school until she finally found the two.

The heroes were talking to a female student.

"Have you seen a kitten around school?" - the hero, Inubouzaki Fuu asked.

The girl casually answered: "A kitten? Nope, haven't seen any".

"Really? Well, thanks. If you find one, tell us".

The hero did not appear to be angered by such lack of courtesy.

At this point, Suzume realised.

(The heroes are... just normal people, aren't they...)

They looked like normal people, and it didn't feel like they had some superhuman powers. They treated the other students like equals too.

Their "hero club" looked like a group of handymen or a volunteer organisation.

Inubouzaki Fuu and Miyoshi Karin were walking through the hallway while talking.

"It's probably impossible to find a kitten who ran away in the morning now. In the first place, it's probably outside the school grounds already".

"Yeah, I guess. But we don't really have enough people to search around the whole city... Karin, any ideas?"

"If I had any supplements we could use to lure it... Wait, before that."

Karin took a ballpoint pen out of her pocket, suddenly turned around and threw it.

## Thunk!

The pen hit the corner of the wall where Suzume was hiding.

"Eeeek!" - Suzume accidentally raised her voice and fell on her butt.

Karin stood in front of Suzume and looked down at her.

"You've been trailing us back from the clubroom. What's your deal?"

(T-t-t-they've found me!?..)

Startled by Karin's imposing look and voice, Suzume nearly wet herself. She was about to run away crying, but her legs were shaking from fear, she couldn't move an inch.

But then a light chop was delivered to the head of Karin, staring down Suzume.

"Ow!"

"Hey, you! Don't threaten people! And don't throw pens at walls!"

Suzume was caught by Fuu and Karin and brought to their clubroom. She felt

like an alien being taken away by the men in black. Soon afterwards Yuuki Yuuna, Inubouzaki Itsuki and Tougou Mimori finished their tasks as well and returned to the clubroom.

Suzume was sitting on the floor in the seiza position in front of the heroes. Nobody told her to, she just wanted to show that she bore absolutely no will to resist.

"Eh? Who's this girl? A new club members? Oh, Karin-chan, is this your little sister?"

"Why, we don't look alike at all!" - retorted Karin to Yuuna's sudden suggestion.

"Did you come from a different school?" - asked Mimori, having noticed the different uniform.

"Y-yes... I-I'm Kagajou Suzume. I'm from a school in Ehime... I've heard rumours about the "Hero club", so I came to check it out".

"Ehime! Our hero club's name has finally spread even to other prefectures! Thanks to Tougou's homepage we got well-known over the internet, but that's a different thing... Even girls our age are getting curious about us now... Mwahaha, the girl power inside me is throbbing!.."

"Sis, your girl power is starting to turn into something weird..." - Itsuki let out a bitter smile at Fuu's rising spirits.

"Suzume-chan, we're the club who heroically works for the sake of other people! In other words, a hero club! We take requests from a lot of people and help them out!"

"Yuuna, if she came from a different prefecture after knowing our name, obviously she knows what we do already".

"Ah, that's probably right! Great job as always, Karin-chan!" - said Yuuna with admiration.

Suzume didn't actually know what their activities were, but thanks to Yuuna she understood. Her initial guess wasn't that far away either.

"So, Kagajou-san, if you came here from a different prefecture, you must have

some kind of request for us, right?"

At Mimori's question, Suzume was lost. She had no requests. But if she said that, she'd probably be met with a retort like "Well then why did you come here?" That would be dangerous.

"...Umm... T-that's right, I have a request!"

Suzume blurted out something she came up with on the spot: "I-I've always been a coward! That's why... I want to get a bit more brave, even just slightly!"

Even though it was something she came up on the spot...no, exactly because she came up with it on the spot, Suzume revealed her deepest desire.

"To become brave. That's just the right request for the hero club, Fuu-senpai! Let's give her our help!" - exclaimed Yuuna with enthusiasm.

"Alright, gotcha!"

Fuu drew a check on the blackboard.

"Today's request number two! Helping Kagajou-san with becoming brave!"

"Yuuna, Tougou, Itsuki dealt with their requests unexpectedly quickly anyway, and our cat searching is stopped until we go searching around the town tomorrow along with the client, so we've got time. But what do we do with an emotional problem like that?"

"Maybe search for psychology books? I'll try to find out" - Mimori faced the computer and started looking up psychology and counselling-related sites.

"If you want to cure your cowardice, you have to eat dried sardines".

"...eh, do dried sardines really have that effect?"

To the doubtful Suzume, Karin delivered a boastful answer: "dried sardines are full of calcium, iron, amino acids, DHA and EPA. Calcium, iron, DHA and EPA lighten anxiousness. Amino acids turn into a substance known as serotonin in your brain, which heightens your mood. Which means if you eat dried sardines, your fears will fade away and you'll get brave. Now eat up".

"Uh, okay".

Karin took out a bag full of dried sardines and forced it on Suzume.

"I found a psychological book on how to cure cowardice. I'll go to the library".

"I'll go with you, Tougou-san!"

Yuuna grabbed Tougou's wheelchair and went outside the clubroom.

"T-thank you very much", - taken aback by their vigour, Suzume bowed.

Itsuki then started lining up tarot cards on the table.

"Kagajou-san, I think that fear comes from the feeling of "not knowing". So if you know your future, there will be less things to be afraid of. So let's try fortune telling. I can even teach you tarot if you'd like".

"O-okay..." - Suzume nodded, unable to turn down the earnest Itsuki.

(Why are these people thinking about that so seriously?)

They have no reason to care about Suzume. They wouldn't get a reward for helping her either. So why they were this eager to help some stranger?

Suzume was eating dried sardines, reading the book Tougou and Yuuna brought and listening to Itsuki's fortune-telling instructions.

"Uh... I think I got some bravery now. Thank you very much. I'll be on my way then!"

Afraid that if she stayed any longer, she'd be busted, Suzume tried to get away. Then, she saw a figure of a cat sleeping on the edge of the roof of the neighbouring school building in the window.

"...is that a cat?" - pointed her finger Suzume.

"Aaaah! The lost kitten from the request! Kagajou-san, well spotted!"

Fuu burst out of the classroom, and the others followed suit.

"Suzume-chan! Come with us!

"Eh? O-okay", - responding to Yuuna, accidentally said Suzume.

All of the hero club members plus Suzume arrived at the rooftop of the school building.

(How did I end up coming here with them?)

The kitten was still sleeping on the edge of the roof.

"I'll get it back!"

Yuuna went past the guard railings and was approaching it.

"Yuuna-chan, be careful!"

"Don't worry, Tougou-san! Okay, carefully, not to startle it..."

Yuuna was slowly coming towards the kitten.

The kitten noticed her, but couldn't run anywhere. As if understanding that flailing around would only end up putting itself in danger, it let itself get picked by Yuuna without much resistance. Carrying the kitten, Yuuna handed it over to Itsuki, who was on the other side of the railing.

"Alright, request complete. Now-"

That moment, a strong wind suddenly blew. To Suzume's eyes everything looked like it was in slow motion.

Yuuna lost her balance.

Suzume moved.

Suzume leaned over the railing and grabbed Yuuna's sleeve, trying to save her.

However, she couldn't drag her up and lost her footing as well.

They both fell down.

The few seconds until they hit the ground felt horribly drawn out.

(What am I even doing?..)

Why did a coward like her do something dangerous like trying to save Yuuna?

She didn't understand herself either.

Did she feel responsibility for having spotted the kitten and brought them here? Or did she feel indebted to the girls who worked so earnestly for someone like her, who they barely knew?

(Either way, it's not like me at all...)

While falling, Suzume tightly grabbed on to Yuuna. For some reason, she felt like being right next to her bore the highest chances of survival. Suzume, with

her extraordinary knack for everything related to surviving, understood that instinctively.

"Uuuh..."

When she came to, Yuuna was lying there, passed out. Suzume looked over her own body to see where she hit herself while falling. Her shoulder was slightly hurting, but otherwise she had no injuries. Yuuna, lying nearby didn't look injured either, and must've been fine.

"I, I'm aliiiiive! What a reliiiiiief!" - yelled out Suzume with tears welling up in her eyes.

"Uuh... It hurts..." - Yuuna opened her eyes as well.

"Yuuki-san! We've alive!"

"Y-you're right! How!?"

A fall from that height would usually be lethal. With luck, you'd be off with heavy injuries. Being unharmed by that fall was nothing short of a miracle.

Right before they made contact with the ground, a small pink cow-like being and a pale film-like thing appeared and protected Yuuna - or so it seemed like to Suzume.

(Was I... saved by a barrier protecting Yuuna-san? Yeah, no way, I'm just imagining things) The weird cow and pale film must've been her eyes playing tricks on her, or so Suzume assumed.

Above Suzume and Yuuna's heads were lush, verdant trees. They must've fallen through those and had the impact softened.

"Anyway, it's good to be aliiiiiiiive!" - loudly screamed out Suzume.

The rest of the heroes immediately descended down, and took Suzume and Yuuna to the infirmary just in case.

Mimori was loudly weeping, and the other three, while not as blatant as her, had tears in their eyes.

"Ahaha... If anything happened to Yuuna, I'd probably have to pay with my life..." - Fuu said in a fairly serious tone.

Looking at them, Suzume realised that Yuuna must be really loved by the rest of the girls around her.

"Suzume-chan, thank you! You tried to save me there, right?" - said Yuuna with a smile.

"But I wasn't of any use..."

Completely useless. While putting herself in danger was completely unlike her, not being of any use at all was just like her

"Look, Suzume-chan! I don't think you're right when you say you don't have any bravery! I mean, you tried saving me, even if it was so dangerous! If you weren't brave, you couldn't have done that!"

"No, that's... That's not bravery, I just moved reflexively..."

"That's why it's bravery!"

"Huh?.."

"Ah, well, how do I say it, we're kind of like that too..." - Yuuna got flustered and was fumbling for words.

Then Fuu let out a wry smile and joined in: "Kagajou-san. We don't have bravery either".

"Eh? But..."

These girls fought the Vertexes, unspeakable monstrosities. They couldn't possibly do that if they weren't brave.

"Everyone hates painful and scary things. If they don't, then they're broken somewhere as a human being. Being brave is about hating painful and scary things, but doing your best when the push comes to shove. But people like that don't do that because they think "I've got bravery, so I'll keep going!" When they end up doing their best, the people around them think "This person is brave!" The person themselves doesn't really think that. Isn't it just like what you did, Kagajou-san?"

"...Do you think so? But still, I really am a coward..."

Yuuna clasped Suzume's hands.

"I'm a coward too. I hate when it's scary or it hurts. But if my friends were in trouble, I think I'd definitely save them even if it was painful or scary. Just like you did right now, Suzume-chan!"

Brave, but cowardly? Suzume didn't really understand.

Mimori came near Suzume and said: "First of all, let me deeply thank you for saving Yuuna-chan. And, Kagajou-san. I think bravery and cowardice aren't opposites of each other. I think they can coexist. A person who's cowardly, but at the same time brave. Kagajou-san, I think you're a person like that".

"Uuh, I couldn't say it properly so Fuu-senpai and Tougou-san said it instead... I'm really bad at explaining things", - Yuuna lowered her shoulders in dejection.

"Yuuna-san, don't worry! Everyone knew that from the start!"

"Itsuki, that doesn't really help... Well, it's Yuuna, what can you do".

Itsuki tried encouraging Yuuna, while Karin teased her.

"Hehe, that's just like Yuuna-chan".

"Yeah, it is".



Tougou and Fuu smiled. They were a friendly group of girls you could find everywhere. Nothing about them looked like they were tasked with the country's most important duty.

Mebuki and the rest kept listening to Suzume's story.

"And that was the dramatic meeting of the heroes and yours truly, Kagajou Suzume! Just like Mebu says, the heroes aren't really that different from the rest of us. Both on the outside and the inside. But..."

Suzume looked at her hands. The ones that Yuuna grasped. When she got touched by Yuuna, she felt a strange warmth.

"But, they felt like good people to me. I still don't really get what they were trying to say about the coexistence of bravery and cowardice though".

Aya smiled at Suzume's words.

"Suzume-senpai, I think the heroes described you very well. You're both a coward and a brave person. If you were just a coward without any bravery, you couldn't have protected everyone against Sagittarius like you did during your last duty".

Mebuki, on the other hand, could only feel the discomfort in her mind grow when she listened to Suzume's story.

(That's right, Miyoshi Karin and the rest of the heroes, they're just like us... Where are they different to me?)

Why wasn't she chosen?

What is a hero?

Mebuki still couldn't grasp that.

That night, after Mebuki returned from her training, she was building a plastic model.

Amongst Shikoku's 88 temples, some have five-storied pagodas. Mebuki was building a 1/60 model of one of them. Not just the ornaments and the look of it, but even the layout of the wood composing the real thing were replicated in that model.

Building plastic models and DIY were Mebuki's sole hobbies. Being a temple carpenter, her father often made models. Sometimes he'd made models of historically famous buildings for exhibitions, sometimes he would first make a smaller version of a large-scale shrine that was being planned. Looking at her father, Mebuki would sometimes end up building models herself, and eventually became quite adept at it, making a bunch of well-done articles herself.

While constructing, Mebuki could lose herself in her thoughts. And now, as well, she was thinking about various things.

About what would happen to the squad afterwards.

About how the investigation locations kept moving further away from the wall.

About how the time they spent on the missions kept increasing.

About how the longer they were outside, the more danger the sentinels were subjected to.

About how they would probably keep encountering more of the enemies as powerful as last time.

About how to keep going without any casualties.

About how long the sentinel duty would continue.

About if what they were doing really was helpful in protecting the world.

And then, she remembered Suzume's story she heard earlier.

The heroes are no different from ordinary humans. No different from Mebuki. Then why isn't Mebuki a hero? Why couldn't she become one?

Right then she heard a knock on the door, and Suzume shyly entered the room.

Mebuki stopped building her model and asked: "What's wrong?"

"You know... When I was talking about the heroes, you were making a gloomy face, Mebu".

"...That's right. I still can't accept it... The fact Miyoshi Karin was selected as a

hero".

If it was anyone but Suzume, Mebuki would not be able to speak her mind openly like that. Their personalities couldn't be any further apart, but Mebuki could open her heart to Suzume.

"You know, Mebu".

"What?"

"For me, you're a hero, Mebu! Not the tiniest bit worse than Miyoshi-san or Yuuki-san! You're amazing, Mebu! I really think that!"

Suzume's words that almost sounded like a complaint made Mebuki's eyes widen for a moment. Then she looked at Suzume with scorn.

"Aren't you just flattering me?"

"...Honestly, there's that too".

"Su-zu-me..."

"D-don't get angryyyy, Mebuuu~! I mean, if you don't protect me, I'll diiiiiiie!" Just what does Suzume think of me - Mebuki was astonished.

"A-and anyway! Yes, I am flattering you, but these are my honest feelings too! Mebu, you really are hero for me!"

"Do you think that will make me happy right after you said you're flattering me? Good grief..." - Mebuki let out a bitter smile. In truth, she was somewhat happy.

Even if she did it out of self-interest, Suzume, who called Mebuki her hero, was a special being to her.

"Of course I'll protect you. I won't let anyone in my squad die".

"Thank you, Mebuuu~! I'm alive thanks to you, you know~! You really are my hero, Mebuuu~!"

Suzume was tightly clinging to Mebuki.

The relationship of the two girls was hard to understand at first glance. But maybe it was something called friendship.

And then, thanks to the efforts of Mebuki and all the other sentinels, their duty has progressed from investigation to the next stage.

And so, the next mission entrusted to them was this - the arduous task of taking Kokudo Aya outside the wall.

(Chapter 3, end)

DENGEKIG'S

DENGEKIG'S

263

COVERNOR STORTER STORTER





## Chapter 4 - Even a starving hawk will not eat grass

In the large bath located in the training facility, Mebuki was being kindly embraced by Aya. There were no other people there.

Although Aya's body was much smaller, she was patting Mebuki's head as one would when calming a child.

"Ah... Aya-chan?" - Mebuki was puzzled, but Aya didn't stop.

"Mebuki-senpai, you always have such a hard time..." - Aya's voice expressed notes of compassion and sorrow.

A white table. A white chair. A white ceramic teapot with a matching cup.

Miroku Yumiko was enjoying some black tea in the seaside park near the Gold Tower.

"Elegant teatime graced by the sight of the sea... A pastime truly befitting of a heiress of the Miroku family", - said Yumiko with delight.

After the lunch was over, she would always enjoy some teatime until the afternoon training. For Yumiko, it was a precious time of refreshment for her mind and body.

Feeling the autumn breeze blowing from the sea towards her, she pressed the cup to her lips. The sweetness and richness of the milk tea made from Assam leaves unraveled inside her mouth.

"It almost feels like the wind is calling out to me..."

"Pfft!"

An explosive laugh shook Yumiko's euphoric bliss away. When she turned around, she saw Suzume, desperately trying to hold back her laughter, and Mebuki, with a slight look of amazement on her face.

"The wind!... Is ca-calling out! Pfftheehee, hah..."

"Wh-what is it, Suzume-san!? What might you be finding odd about my graceful enjoyment of an elegant teatime!?"

"Miroku-san... I don't think there were ever tables or chairs like this at the seaside park", - Mebuki pointed her fingers at the ones Yumiko was using.

"Those are my belongings. For a refined pastime, an appropriate interior is of utmost importance".

"Did you really bring them out here yourself?"

"Naturally", - Yumiko immediately nodded to Mebuki's question, as if that was a matter of course.

Mebuki imagined the sight of Yumiko carrying in the table and chair from her own room at the Gold Tower here for the sake of her teatime. Carrying both of them by herself, she probably had to try her best to bring them here. It might have been autumn already, but the lingering heat was still harsh, she must've been dripping with sweat, and all alone. It was a surreal scene, far removed from the concepts of nobility and elegance.

"Pfft!" - Suzume burst out laughing again, perhaps having imagined the same as well.

"I shall ask again, what do you find odd about this!?" - unable to understand the reason behind Suzume's laughter, Yumiko was turning beet red.

"Anyway, Miroku-san. They called in a meeting", - Mebuki cut the talking off and got to the important matters. That merciless way of interrupting a conversation was another manifestation of Mebuki's overly serious personality and lack of communication skills.

"A meeting? For what purpose?"

"They'll tell us once all of the sentinels are assembled on the viewing platform. Anyway, just come there please".

Yumiko let out a small sigh.

"It is a shame that my elegant teatime has to be interrupted, but it cannot be helped. Oh, and Mebuki-san, Suzume-san. Would you object to assisting me with getting the chair and table back? Carrying them alone is quite an ordeal".

"It sure must be..."

Mebuki was amazed, but the meeting probably wouldn't start until everyone was assembled, so tidying up as soon as possible and heading to the viewing platform was probably for the best. Thinking like that, Mebuki agreed to assist. Mebuki and Yumiko carried the table together, while Suzume carried the chair, since she'd probably feel awkward if she was the only one empty-handed.

Mebuki could not understand the thoughts of Yumiko, who behaved and acted as a daughter of an esteemed family in all things. In the first place, the Miroku family wasn't even anywhere as much of an "esteemed family" as Yumiko claimed.

Mebuki, along with those two and the rest of the sentinels started assembling at the viewing platform. After all 32 of them were there, the mask-wearing priestess made her appearance. She stood in front of the sentinels and started indifferently speaking.

"All of you did a great job during the missions outside of the wall until now. Thanks to your efforts, the investigation concerning the land and blazing flames outside has been finished"

To become accepted as a Hero, Mebuki has been fulfilling her duties as a sentinel perfectly. However, the words "because of your efforts" didn't quite make her feel appreciated by the Taisha. They only made her feel impatience and irritation...

"The duty of the sentinels will now be moving from investigation to the next stage", - with those words, she showed the sentinels a plastic Petri dish. Inside the dish was a singular seed. And that seed was faintly glowing.

"You are to plant this in the soil outside the wall. After that, the miko will read a prayer. The seed will reac to her words, sprout, and start growing outside of the wall. If everything goes according to the theory, the place where it grows will return to being green".

"The miko's prayer?.. Wait, you're saying to take Ayaya outside the wall!?" - Suzume raised her voice.

In order to complete the mission the priestess just mentioned, Aya would

have to leave the wall's borders along with the sentinels. A girl with no combat abilities at all would be thrown into a scorching world squirming with Stardust and Vertex-alikes.

"Correct. As a miko, Kokudo-san was brought to the Tower partially as preparation for this sort of duty", - said the priestess without any emotion.

Mebuki raised a voice of protest: "Wait a little, bringing her outside the wall would be too dangerous. In the first place, the world outside the wall is ablaze, there's no way a miko could handle that".

"No concern is needed. There is special mike equipment prepared, similar to your battle suits".

"But what about the Stardust and the Vertexes?"

"You sentinels will simply have to protect her".

The first time the sentinels, capable of combat, sortied outside the wall, several of them ended up with heavy injuries. The danger of bringing a miko, completely incapable of fighting, outside was immeasurable.

"Shouldn't you be able to? You, Kusunoki-san".

"..."

The priestess' question was purely rhetorical. No matter what Mebuki answered, there would be no change to the mission.

And so, without waiting for Mebuki to answer, she continued: "Kusunoki-san, we will be counting on you. Please take care of Kokudo-san".

Mebuki felt that the voice of the priestess carried no feelings at all.

"Planting a seed... Is our next task to revive plant life in the soil outside of the wall, perhaps?"

Yumiko's question was met with an answer in the same unchanging tone of voice.

"No, if you were to do that on such a small scale, no time in the world would be enough. There are not that many seeds. The places where you plant them will form a route... in other words, a bridgehead towards a certain place". "It being?"

"A place called the Kinki region long ago, in the Christian Era. Once you're there, you are to establish an encampment. This will be your mission".

Those words made Mebuki bite her lip.

"...And after that, it will be the heroes' turn?"

"There is no need for you to know. This concludes the announcement. Please do your utmost to fulfil your task", - the priestess turned around and left the viewing platform.

She told them the orders and one-sidedly cut the conversation, as always. And, naturally, told them nothing of importance.

The sentinels' existence was made light of like that.

Their mission this time was making preparations for the heroes' battle... And thus, could not have been any more humiliating for Mebuki.

During the afternoon training, Mebuki was in a bad mood.

"Haaaah!"

Mebuki was using a wooden rifle and sparring with Shizuku. Not the calm Shizuku, but the belligerent Shizuku.

Mebuki drove away Shizuku's rifle swing with all her strength. Against such power, Shizuku, who had a light body, was sent flying. With a backflip, she regained her posture, but would have smashed straight into a wall if it wasn't for her quick reaction.

"Woah, that was close. The hell's up with Kusunoki today? She's way too into this". "

Without paying any attention to Shizuku, Mebuki called out a different sentinel.

"Next! Hurry it up!"

"Ah, yes!"

Startled by Mebuki's angry look, the girl took up a wooden rifle and readied herself. Being one of the officers, that girl has considerable combat abilities, but

was sent flying all too easily by Mebuki.

"Eeeek... Mebu's kinda scary today. A wise man keeps away from danger, so I'll just quietly train by myself in a corner..."

Suzume sneakily headed towards the edge of the training grounds. But Mebuki didn't let her get away.

"Suzume!"

"Ye-yesh!" - Suzume let out a weird voice by accident.

"Come here! You can't do shield training on your own, right? I'll be your sparring partner".

"N-nono, thanks for your concern! The difference between me, number 32 and you, number 1 is too big, Mebu! I'll just ask a gunner type around number 30..."

"You won't get stronger by fighting weak opponents. Come here already!"

"Uuh, understood..."

Afraid that speaking up would make her even angrier, Suzume timidly approached Mebuki.

"Now, ready your shield".

"O-okay..." - the scared Suzume took up a wooden shield for training.

"Haaaah!"

With overwhelming power, Mebuki thrust at Suzume's shield and pushed her away. It was a frightening blow that almost broke the shield.

"Eeeeeek!" - withstanding Mebuki's attack, Suzume went teary-eyed.

"Suzume, hold your shield properly! This isn't even comparable to the attacks of the Stardust!"

"Even if you say that! Gyah, I'm gonna die!"

After a while, not being able to withstand Mebuki's onslaught, Suzume had her shield flicked away.

"On our next mission we'll have to advance while protecting the miko. The

protectors' role is crucial! Put more effort into it!"

"Mebu, you're scarier than the Vertexes..." - quietly blurted out Suzume.

"N-no, nothing!" - glared at by Mebuki, Suzume started intensely shaking her head.

"Next one!"

Amongst the girls afraid of Mebuki's menacing look, one fearlessly stood up.

"In that case, I, Miroku Yumiko, shall serve as your opponent! In anticipation for our following duty, I shall take you, my rival, Mebuki-san down! Take thiiiiiiis!" - with a loud yell, she thrust the rifle in her hands at Mebuki.

"What kind of... anticipation!?"

What was there to anticipate? This time the sentinels would be made light of, just like always.

Mebuki dodged Yumiko's thrust and struck her back, unstable from overextending, with the rifle. Yumiko fell face-first onto the floor.

"Aguh!"

"Miroku-san, you put in way too much vigor and overextend all the time! That's why you constantly put yourself in unnecessary danger!"

After roaring out at Yumiko, Mebuki glanced around the other 30 of the sentinels gathered at the training grounds.

"All of you, you lack training! At this rate, on the next mission, or the one after that... Eventually, somebody might get grave injuries or even die! None of them will protect us! We have to protect ourselves on our own! This kind of weakness... Is exactly why none of you became heroes!" - Mebuki's irritation turned into words and flew out of her mouth.

"...Those words of yours are indeed correct, Mebuki-san... However, you certainly appear to be in an ill mood today" - grimacing from the pain of being hit in the back, Yumiko stood up.

"Miroku-san, do you think about nothing? Our next mission is... just being

<sup>&</sup>quot;Did you say something?"

heralds for the heroes! Even though we faced so much danger in our investigation missions, and will face it in our upcoming ones... Our lives are at stake, but the tasks given to us are basically worthless! Miroku-san, do you not feel frustrated about that!?"

Does Yumiko think nothing about this humiliating mission? Does she, who constantly talks about earning achievements, accept being a mere herald for the heroes? How is she so positive!?

"...Naturally, I'm frustrated", - Yumiko's voice burned with quiet fury. She hasn't accepted the way the Taisha treated them. She merely held back the anger and displeasure.

"However, that simply means that is as much worth as the Taisha sees in us right now. Frustrated as I might be, no amount of tantrums or screaming will amount to anything. And so, our only choice is to earnestly do what we can do at the moment".

"But-" - Mebuki's objection was interrupted by Yumiko.

"And I think of no duty given to me as worthless. Investigation and establishment of a camp might indeed be dull tasks, but they are indispensable in a war. And besides, piling achievements on and on and on... Shall undoubtedly end up in a result. Someday, it shall be a duty of a hero, or one comparable to it. Which is to say, for us "worthless tasks" do not exist! All of them are of utmost importance!"

"!.." - Mebuki was dumbfounded by Yumiko's words.

"We have accomplished our investigation duties with naught a casualty among us. Having bested the expectations of the Taisha, who created the sentinel system with the premise of casualties, is nothing if not a great achievement. And if we achieve the same results far beyond their expectations in our encampment establishment mission, they shall surely be incapable of making light of us any more. What we are doing right now is, speaking in construction terms, making a foundation. As a daughter of a carpenter, surely you must understand the importance of that!?"

Mebuki was lost for words. The training grounds were silent. Mebuki, Suzume, a chatterbox, Shizuku, who was quick to pick fights - none of them

could open their mouths.

Yumiko was considered by the rest to be a hothead who thought too little. But she was completely down to earth in her thoughts about the duty of a sentinel, and more earnest about it than anyone.

After several seconds, or perhaps several dozens of them, Mebuki broke the silence.

"...You're right... It's just like you say, Miroku-san... I'm sorry, everyone. I was just venting out my anger at you", - Mebuki bowed her head to the rest of the sentinels and then turned around to Yumiko.

"Thank you very much, Miroku-san. Thanks to you, I'm finally back to my senses".

"There is no need for thanks. I am your senpai by a year, after all. Guiding the younger is thus, also a part of my duty".

"...Thank you... Oh, and sorry. I only now remembered you were one year older, Miroku-san".

"Wha-Mebuki-san!?"

That night, Mebuki was in the large bath in the training facility. Every room had a small shower stall installed, but there was also a large bath built for them to be able to wash off their sweat together. But since, not counting the time after training, most of the sentinels used their shower stalls, Mebuki was the only one at the bath.

(I was the worst today...)

During training, Mebuki lost all sense of composure. She might have felt anger and frustration, but that didn't mean she had the right to let them out at others.

When Mebuki's father got unreasonable requests from the Taisha or had to take responsibility for his colleagues' mistakes, he never vented out his anger at other people. He just silently finished his job.

(Compared to that... I'm so childish...)

Mebuki hated herself.

"Huh, Mebuki-senpai?"

Then Kokudo Aya entered the bath.

"It's unusual to see you at the bath, Mebuki-senpai", - with an innocent smile, Aya washed off her body. Then she entered the bath, and sat next to Mebuki.

"Aya-chan, do you use this bath often?"

"Yeah, using just the shower doesn't feel that pleasant. And it's huge, so when there aren't a lot of people, you can even swim. Like this!" - Aya started paddling her limbs.

"Aya-chan, you shouldn't swim in a bath".

"Ah, I'm sorry".

"Mebuki-senpai, you look down".

"Well... It's about the afternoon training".

"Ah... Suzume-senpai said you got into a fight with Miroku-senpai".

"That Suzume... What a blabbermouth", - Mebuki let out a bitter smile.

"You get along so well with Miroku-senpai, and then a fight... Wait, you argue all the time, and that's a proof of getting along..."

"We don't get along that well. Miroku-san just constantly hangs around me. And anyway, today wasn't a fight. I was the one completely in the wrong, and got reprimanded for that".

Aya's eyes went round.

"Mebuki-senpai getting scolded by Miroku-senpai... I can't even imagine that".

Mebuki told Aya about what happened in the training grounds. About her irritation about their new mission and how she let it out at the rest of the sentinels. About how Yumiko's words were completely right and made Mebuki disgusted with herself.

Aya silently hugged the sighing Mebuki. Although Aya's body was much smaller, she was patting Mebuki's head as one would when calming a child.

"Ah... Aya-chan?" - Mebuki was puzzled, but Aya kept holding her.

And then, as if she herself was in pain, Aya said with sadness: "Mebuki-senpai, you always have such a hard time..."

"A hard time..."

"I've heard most of what happened before you became a sentinel... before you ended up here. Mebuki-senpai, you always put all of yourself into things... So you end up with a lot of expectations, and when they don't come true... You end up hurting too much. If you had no expectations, if you'd just give up, you wouldn't be hurting. But since you're earnest, and don't give up, you're constantly hurting".

"...I'm..."

When she was a hero candidate, she expected to be a hero. And because of that, no matter how harsh the training was, she would follow it through. But when the priests called her, it was to inform her of her failure.

When she came to the Gold Tower, she again expected to become a hero. But instead, she became a sentinel - expendable, disposable.

And then she fulfilled her sentinel duty enough for 32 people, hoping to become closer to a hero. But, as she found out today, her new mission would be even more dangerous than ever, and just as much humiliating.

What Mebuki wanted was always in front of her. But despite looking close enough to grasp, it was too far out of her reach. It was a mirage that only existed to make Mebuki run towards it, to make her heart race.

"But even so, you won't give up, will you..."

"Of course... I'll never give up. If I do, my way of life until now... The lives of the other sentinels will end up just having been used and made fun of. I won't allow that..."

Hearing those words, Aya smiled.

"Mebuki-senpai, it's not just yourself. You can't allow the other sentinels to be made light of either, right?"

"I... don't know... But I can't forgive the Taisha for looking down on us

sentinels as disposable and not treating us as people".

Two years ago, when Mebuki was a hero candidate, she did everything on her own. She was fine with only thinking about herself.

But having become a leader of a squad, she started paying attention to her surroundings... Something inside Mebuki started changing.

Aya patted her head. Despite being treated as a child by someone younger than her, Mebuki, oddly enough, didn't feel displeased.

"I'm looking at everyone, you see".

" "

"How you do your best, Mebuki-senpai. How everyone risks their lives to complete their missions. I see all of that. Even if anyone else makes light of you all, I know how much you struggle".

The priests made light of them.

The Taisha viewed them as disposable.

This little girl was the only one who was close to them.

"You know, Mebuki-senpai, I'll be going outside the wall with everyone on your next mission".

"That's right... I won't forgive that either. What are the Taisha even thinking? To have a miko accompany us... They're well aware of how dangerous that is!"

Were not just the sentinels, but the mikos disposable as well for the Taisha? They were making light of all people.

"That's right, it's going to be a very dangerous duty... But I'm a little happy".

"Eh?"

"I always wait until you sentinels return. Return from your missions, wounded, worn-out... I might be a miko, but I have nothing to offer to you all. I couldn't even share your pain, nothing at all... I hated that. But now I'll be together with everyone, and I'll be a bit useful for the duty".

"...Aren't you scared?"

"I am... I calmed down now, but when I heard about it, I couldn't stop shaking... Once I'm outside, I might just end up frozen in one place and crying. But the sentinels have to endure that pain and fear all the time, right? Even if it's scary and terrible... I'm more happy about that than being a useless decoration that can do nothing else than wait".

II II

Mikos have no combat ability. They don't have combat training either. So the fear and danger she would face in this mission would be even stronger than the ones for the sentinels.

But Aya endured that. With her small body, she frantically endured it, and even smiled at Mebuki and the rest.

"During this mission, I will be next to you all and see what you do. And then I'll tell Shinju-sama that you're working really, really hard, Mebuki-senpai. Our oracles are always one-sided, so I don't know if my words will reach... But I will tell it with all my strength. That you're working just as hard as the heroes".

"Aya-chan..."

"From my view, you're no different from the heroes, Mebuki-senpai. You're a hero as well".

"...Thanks".

Someone called her, a desperately struggling failure like that, a hero. Suzume did the same. And now someone else did that.

She felt happy, but at the same time ashamed of herself.

Aya, who should have been the most scared one by today's mission announcement, was bravely encouraging Mebuki. But what about herself? She shouldn't have lost her temper and lashed out at others.

Little by little, the amount of people who accepted Mebuki being no different from the heroes grew. So she should just keep repeating that - thought Mebuki. And then eventually, most people around her would accept Mebuki as a hero.

The deeds need to come first - the name will come later. That was Mebuki's intention in the first place. But she let herself lose her head in anger at the

Taisha and forget that idea.

"I'm such an idiot... Throwing a tantrum like a complete child".

"And what's wrong with being a child? Mebuki-senpai, I think you're trying to be an adult way too soon. You're cute as a child too, Mebuki-senpai!" - Aya giggled, turning Mebuki's face red.

Mebuki cleared her throat.

"A-anyway. Sending a miko outside the barrier is a dangerous duty, but don't worry. We will definitely protect you. We won't let those monsters put even a scratch on you"

The next morning, when Mebuki headed out to the seaside park for her running routine, she stumbled upon Yumiko.

"Mebuki-san, is this not a wonderfully refreshing morning?"

"What are you even doing here..."

"I was just about to enjoy some splendid morning tea".

Today, Yumiko brought out a table and a chair to the park again and was sipping on some black tea. Her attire, however, was odd. Yumiko, for some reason, was wearing a tracksuit.

"Yeah, there's nothing "elegant" about doing that in your clothes..."

"The pheromones of grace flowing from the body of me, a heiress of the Miroku house, produce elegance no matter the attire. And thus, to prove that, I am enjoying some teatime in a tracksuit today".

"Where is that confidence coming from..." - Mebuki was dumbfounded.

"Well, that was a joke. The statement about my overflowing with elegance even while in a tracksuit was true, however".

"I hoped it would be one".

"Today I was planning to accompany you for your run, Mebuki-san. Thus the tracksuit".

"I don't mind, but... Will you be able to keep up?"

Every morning, Mebuki ran a considerable distance at a considerable speed. It would be hard for someone who only started to keep up with her.

But Yumiko didn't lose her confidence.

"I would ask you not to underestimate Miroku Yumiko".

And just as she stated, she kept up with Mebuki without fail. Her form and pacing made it obvious that Yumiko didn't just start running on a whim that day. She must have regularly trained and ran to build her stamina.

Yumiko was prone to mindlessly charge and end up in unnecessary danger, but her fundamental abilities were by no means low.

"You look much better than you did last night, Mebuki-san".

"Well, I kind of got over myself".

"That is splendid. There is a lot to think about in our position, but for now we must simply do what we are able to do".

"Yeah, that's right".

It was just as Yumiko said. In their position, they could only live as hard as they could. No amount of laments would change their unreasonable treatment

While keeping up a speed of more than 10 km/h, the two were talking.

"Incidentally, Mebuki-san, how much do you know about the Miroku family?"

"Honestly, basically nothing. Until I met you, I haven't even heard the name".

Since Mebuki's father worked with the Taisha, she had more information on it than an ordinary person. She was well aware of the Nogi family, who possessed massive influence in the Taisha, for example, but she couldn't remember the name Miroku ever appear in conversations. \Yumiko's response to those words was not anger, but rather a sad smile.

"Well, that is of no surprise. After all, the Miroku family has come to ruin now".

"That's right, Aya-chan mentioned how it "helped to save the world" back then. I missed most of that though..."

If it really was a house that did something as important as saving the world, it

should have been more famous, recorded in textbooks and history books.

"Mebuki-san, are you aware of the stone pillars with the names of the great family that stood at the Great Bridge that collapsed two years ago?"

"Yeah, I know about that".

While it was outside her father's expertise, the Great Bridge was one of Shikoku's biggest structures, so he showed some interest in it as well.

"The Miroku family was one that would not have been out of place on one of those monuments, originally".

"That's..."

If Yumiko was telling the truth, then the Miroku family must have birthed one of the heroes into this world, or accomplished something of equal importance.

"Could it be that one of the past heroes was from the Miroku family then?"

"No, nothing of the sort. However... In the 72nd year of the Divine Era, it has protected Shikoku from the menace of a collapse".

The incident Yumiko was describing immediately surfaced in Mebuki's mind. The widespread terror attacks of DE 72 - a huge incident recorded in the history books.

However, the details of it were not written anywhere. "A cult that lost all sense of reason was planning a mass suicide involving all of Shikoku's citizens" was all that was knows about



Having found out about the Vertexes and the truth of the outside world, she realised that the unclear information must have been a result of Taisha's censorship. However, the Akamine family was said to be the one to suppress the cult...

"The Akamine family was not the only one to have played a pivotal role in the resolving of that incident. The ancestors of the Miroku family were of great importance as well. For that, the Miroku family was proclaimed to be the heroes of Shikoku on par with the Akamine family. However, as a hundred, two hundred years passed, the Miroku family fell into ruin for various reasons. These days it is omitted from the history books, and its influence is long gone".

"So that's how it was..."

"However, fell into ruin as it might have, I still have pride in my family name. I feel honoured to be a part of a house that has in the past saved the lives of many people. I feel proud to have the blood of my heroic ancestors flow through my veins. And I shall have none deny me that belief".

The Kusunoki family had history as a house of carpenters, but it wasn't exactly famous. And so Mebuki couldn't fully understand the pains and worries that concerned the rise and fall of distinguished families.

However, Yumiko's "And I shall have none deny me that belief" resounded deeply in her chest. For Mebuki felt the same. That she wasn't a failure, that she would become a hero no matter what... That belief, she would never allow anyone to deny. For it was her way of life.

"I shall build up my achievements in eyes of the Taisha and restore the Miroku family to its former glory, be certain of it. The duty of a sentinel might be dangerous, dull and humiliating, but for the sake of restoring my family's name, I mind not groveling and eating dirt".

Her face and tone made it clear - those were her genuine beliefs.

In hindsight, it really was strange. She constantly emphasised being a daughter of an esteemed family, liked to stand out and stand at the front. But she has not once raised a complaint about the behind-the-scenes duty of a sentinel. On the contrary, she was always proactive.

That was the resolve the girl named Miroku Yumiko carried. An undomitable determination to rise up the world. The worries Yumiko carried were, at their base, similar to Mebuki's. Yumiko, proudly carrying the blood of the world's saviours, was not evaluated by the others. Mebuki, proudly carrying the conviction she was suitable to be a hero, was not evaluated by the Taisha.

The deviation between their sense of self-worth and the worth given to them by others.

However, Miroku Yumiko faced that distress with resolution and determination. For that, she exerted great efforts. The fact she was able to keep up the pace with Mebuki, the strongest of all the sentinels, was proof of that. In terms of fundamental stamina she achieved by training, she was likely second only to Mebuki

```
"Miroku-san..."
```

"Until now, I kind disliked you because you're reckless and get injured because of that, keep being nosy, and despite that still were number 20".

"Do you not think you might be too harsh!? ...Well, I do have a problem with communication, and it has been there for quite a while..."

"But after talking to you now, I understand. You're just like me, Miroku-san".

She was happy to find a person who shared her problems and beliefs.

For the first time, Mebuki saw Yumiko as not a member of the sentinels, but as another human.

"Miroku-san, let's both fulfil our hopes. My desire to become a hero, your desire to restore your family... Let's see them through".

"There is no need to even say that. That being so, however, I would first need to prove my superiority over you and take the seat of the commander from you. Ahaha! And this running fight shall be my victory as well!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;What is it?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I think I've started to like you, slightly."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hu-huuuuh!? Wh-wh-what might you be saying all of a sudden!?"

Yumiko suddenly raised her speed and ran ahead of Mebuki. She got slightly irritated. Mebuki kicked off, raising her pace, and caught up with Yumiko right away, eventually overtaking her, finishing the running course and returning to the Tower ahead of her.

And then, their new mission started.

Amidst the sentinels treading on the scorching land was Aya, wearing a different garb than usual. It was a special outfit called a Hagoromo, "Angel Raiment". It did not increase the physical abilities like the battle suit, nor did it allow her to fight. It did, however, possess the heat-blocking function that allowed her to withstand the conditions outside the barrier.

(...For some reason, it feels like the heat outside the barrier is stronger than ever this time. I wonder if it's just my imagination...)

Sweat was dripping from Mebuki's head. Was the battle suit malfunctioning? Or perhaps the heat really was more intense than usual?

Aya was also dripping with sweat, and breathed as if in pain.

"Aya-chan, are you okay?"

"Mebuki-senpai... Thanks for your concern, but I'm fine. It's nothing to complain about. You can't move as fast because of me, so the least I could do is suck it up".

Aya did her best to wring out a smile out of herself.

Unlike the sentinels, she, as a miko, only possessed the physical abilities of a normal girl. To match Aya, the sentinels were moving at a much slower speed than usual.

But for this mission, Aya's presence was indispensable. She was its very core.

"All of you have to do your duty in this awful place..."

"That's what we sentinels train for".

There was no wavering in Mebuki's voice. She faced this mission with a clear mind.

(It's all thanks to Aya-chan and Miroku-san...)

Since if she said that out loud, Yumiko would inevitably get full of herself, she decided to never speak her mind about that. However, that's what Mebuki felt.

Mebuki always did everything by herself. Her training as a hero candidate, her duty as a sentinel - all alone. Becoming the commander demanded teamwork from her, but Mebuki didn't think consider the rest to be her friends or comrades. They were nothing more than weapons with the power to accomplish her goal.

That's why she was always in solitude. Without relying on anyone, refusing anyone's support, she kept walking the road of life alone. Gritting her teeth. Dragging her feet. All alone. But now... "Because of her comrades". That's what she thought. Possibly for the first time in her life, she was relying on someone.

"Mebuki-senpai, have you heard the legend of Hagoromo?" - asked Aya while gripping the sleeves of her outfit.

"Hagoromo? No, haven't heard of that".

"It's a story about how a human stole an angel's raiment".

Dragging her feet, Aya started telling the story.

In some lake, an angel descended from the skies was taking a swim. A man saw her, stole her raiment and hid it. Having lost it, the angel couldn't return to heaven. She started living in the human world, married that man and had four children with him. However, eventually she found the hidden raiment, left her family and returned to heaven. The man and children were stricked with grief and kept crying...



"That's a pretty egoistic story".

"I think so as well. The man who stole the raiment was selfish, but so was the angel who left her children. But according to a different version, after returning to heaven, the angel, out of love for her grief-stricken children and husband, descended to them once a year. If she really loved them... Did she really want to return to heaven?"

Legends and mythos rarely mention the characters' thoughts. So it wasn't possible to know for certain what the angel thought.

However... Why did the Taisha give the miko's garb the name of a sacred object that allowed the owner to return to heaven? Mebuki felt ominousness about that.

"Gyaah! Save me, Mebuuu~! They're here! The Stardust are heeeere!" - screamed Suzume while clinging to Mebuki. The time for chatter was over.

"Protector team, deploy shields with Kokudo Aya as the center! Our mission is to deliver the miko to the destination point safely!"

Following her yell, the protector sentinels enlarged their shields and linked them together.

"Mebuu~! I'll defend against the Stardust! But if another huge one comes out, you've gotta protect me!"

She was begging for help as usual, but being able to say "I'll defend against the Stardust" now, perhaps Suzume has changed too, just like Mebuki.

"I shall fight outside the shields!"

"I'm gonna fight outside too! You okay with that, Kusunoki!?"

Yumiko and Shizuku were leaving the protection of the shields. Mebuki stopped feeling irritation about Yumiko's foolhardiness. She was desperately trying to achieve her dream, just like Mebuki.

Shizuku made true of her promise and properly listened to Mebuki's orders, requesting permission for her actions. She was as wild and rash as ever, but by no means did she do as it pleased her.

Mebuki thought...

(This team... These comrades are surprisingly not bad, huh.)

And so, Mebuki gave an order to the entire squad.

"Miroku-san and Shizuku, permission granted! Numbers 1 to 6, plus Miroku Yumiko and Yamabushi Shizuku, engage in combat with the Stardust outside! The rest of the gunner team, return fire from the inside! Let's fulfill our duty without a single casualty this time as well!"

The girls wielding rifles split into two groups: one left the shield wall and engaged in combat with the Stardust outside, while the other one pointed their muzzles out of the openings in the wall and started firing.

With the shields deployed, the sentinels and the miko steadily pushed onward.

Eventually, they reached the location where they were to plant the seed. This mission being their first of the sort, it was not that removed from the wall. Under cover of the protectors' shields, Aya took the seed out of the kagami, and dropped it on the ground. After that, she started the prayer.

"Oh gods of the land, let this day be one a tree root sprouteth. As sprouteth the root, so shall the earth make merry. If the earth be the wife, then the root be the husband. In kind heart..."

Accompanied by the dignified voice, the earth where the seed was dropped started sprouting with greenery. An unimaginable number of sprouts has risen from one mere seed and covered the earth. And not just inside the wall of shields, but even outside small sprouts kept appearing.

Mebuki, who was fighting outside, noticed the appearing plants as well. On the scorched land, where nothing should have possibly been able to grow, green life kept being born.

"Did it work!?.."

The plants kept growing in number. As if the infernal land has been extinguished, the parts enveloped in greenery no longer felt scorching hot.

The reddish earth was being overtaken by the greenery. The soil was coming

back to life. A substantial patch of land was swarming with lush, verdant grass and flowers. It was a divine, breathtaking sight. The sentinels were captivated and let out a sigh.

That's why they didn't notice.

Their eyes captured by the beautiful greenery, they missed the appearance of a gigantic enemy and carelessly let it approach.

"Wooooooah!"

Shizuku's small frame danced in the air. She was struck by a tail made out of countless globes and sent flying. In front of the sentinels was a gigantic monster with a tail that bore a horrendous needle at its end.

"...Scorpio!..Vertex!.." - Mebuki pronounced the name of that enemy. One of the twelve beings possessing a constellation name. The Taisha priests informed them that the Scorpio Vertex has dealt enormous damage to the heroes of the past.

The fragile hopes the sentinels bore were blotted out with despair in a blink of an eye...

(Chapter 4, end)



## Chapter 5 - Clouded moon, Flowers in the wind

Taking Kokudo Aya with them, the Sentinels, save for those with Mebuki, were retreating.

"I'm saving SHIZUKU and getting her back home. My squad will not produce any casualties", - stated Mebuki with resolve while staring at the Scorpio Vertex, who was recovering from a volley of Sentinel gunshots.

"Aaah, fine! I got it! I'm going with you, then!" - said Suzume with a trembling expression that looked like she was about to break into tears any moment.

"Suzume, head back towards the wall. There's no need for you to subject yourself to any more danger".

"I know! I know it's dangerous and I know I should better run! That I'm going to die if I stay here! I'm scared! But I can't leave you alone, Mebu! If you have no shield, who's going to support you!? And I can't leave SHIZUKU alone either!" - wailing like that, Suzume readied her shield.

"It is exactly as Suzume-san says, Mebuki-san. We cannot leave you or Shizuku-san alone. If our squad is not to produce any casualties, then you too must return safely", - standing next to Mebuki, Yumiko readied her rifle.

(This kind of thing... isn't bad.)

Rescuing a comrade together with other comrades and protecting the rest of them...

Mebuki would not allow anyone to end up being a sacrifice for the gods on this mission either.

--

SHIZUKU's body danced through the air and despair appeared on the Sentinels' faces.

A grotesque shape appeared before them. The enemy of mankind, wreathed in wickedness and despair. A monstrosity that embodied death and absurdity. It was a Vertex - one bearing a constellation name, at that.

From inside the shield wall, the Sentinels stared at the giant with astonishment. Those fighting the Stardust outside the wall trembled at the sight of it.

In front of the Scorpio Vertex, all Sentinels, including Mebuki, stood petrified. The first one to escape the stupor was Suzume, dragged out of it by her survival instinct.

"Gyaaaaaah! Save me, Mebuuu~! It's a Vertex! A Vertex!" - Suzume's shriek resounded from inside the shield wall. Thanks to it, Mebuki came back to her senses. She had no time to be blanking out. Their enemy was far too powerful for the Sentinels to engage in combat with. A moment of delay could decide their life or death.

"What are we gonna do!? What are we gonna do, Mebu!? It's a Vertex!"

Mebuki roared out at the wailing Suzume: "Suzume, calm down! It's an imperfect form!"

They have been told that the twelve complete Vertexes have already been vanquished by the Heroes. The Vertexes could be reborn a new a limitless amount of times, but it would take time for them to achieve their complete form again. It was far too soon for a perfect one to appear already. Therefore, the monster towering in front of them right now was an imperfect one lacking a core, just like the Sagittarius Vertex-alike that appeared earlier.

But even so, the Sentinels were in peril.

Scorpio swung its enormous tail to mow the Sentinels down.

"Protector squad! Brace for impact!" - at the roar of Mebuki's voice, the protector-type Sentinels tightly gripped their shields and prepared for the imminent strike. But no preparation could help in front of such force.

A single swing of that tail immediately made the shield wall crumble and the protector squad was sent flying. Without their protection, Aya and the Sentinels who were taking cover inside of the formation ended up defenceless.

(This is bad!..)

If Scorpio aimed for Aya, she wouldn't be able to dodge. She would die in a instant.

The sight of the miko impaled on the horrifying stinger flashed through Mebuki's mind.

Scorpio's tail chose Aya as its target.

"I won't let anyone die!"

Faster than even the stinger, Mebuki pushed Aya down in an attempt to evade, and barely dodged it.

"T-thank you very much, Mebuki-senpai."

Mebuki could hear Aya's words of gratitude, but bit her lip in frustration. That was a bad move. If they fell onto the ground now, then the stinger would come after them the second time well before Aya could get up.

"Mebu, if you die, there's not gonna be anyone left to protect me!" - with a trembling voice and a tear-stained face, Suzume stood in front of the two.

"Suzume!.."

"I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared! It's coming!"

The second stab of the stinger was not directed at Aya and Mebuki, but at Suzume who stood right in front of them.

"Here!"

Suzume leapt forwards, to the ground. The stinger passed above her head by the breadth of her hair. Having evaded the attack, Suzume made contact facefirst with the ground.

"Fugyah!" - a miserable sound squeezed out of her. Had the ground not been covered in greenery, she would've received hideous burns.

Having imagined all of the worst possibilities, she instinctively chose the way that would have the highest chance of survival. She assumed that if she took the attack head-on with her shield, it would immediately break. And out of all the evasive options, she felt that plunging right to the front would be the safest

one.

Suzume got up right away. In front of her eyes was the tail readying for a third strike.

"Waaaaaah!"

Suzume readied her shield. And then just as the stinger was about to collide with it, she jumped backwards and angled her shield. The stab's power reduced, she was able to stave away the third attack as well.

"That's it, the next one is gonna kill me! I'm definitely gonna die next time!" - while screaming out, Suzume kept dodging Scorpio's attacks by the skin of her teeth one after another, stubbornly clinging to life, not unlike a cornered rat desperately trying to survive.

Thanks to Suzume drawing the attention, Mebuki could get Aya away to a certain distance from Scorpio. The rifle-bearing Sentinels lined up in a volley formation.

"Gunner squad! Aim... Fire!"

The volley resounded, and the bullets hit Scorpio's front - the part that vaguely resembled a face, causing heavy damage. It was unclear whether the Vertexes possessed a sense of pain or not, but the tail attacks stopped.

"Mebuki-san, we did it! Now, let us deal the final blow-"

"We won't be continuing the attack! Retreat!"

Yumiko's face contorted with displeasure for a moment when she heard Mebuki's words, but immediately turned into a face of acceptance. She understood the danger of those beings from their encounter with the Sagittarius Vertex-alike. The damage they inflicted right now was but a mere drop in the bucket for them.

(The experiment with using the seed to produce plant life succeeded. We already achieved our goal. Now the only thing left is to make sure everyone gets home safely!)

The destroyed part of Scorpio has started gradually regenerating. After it finished, it would undoubtedly attack the Sentinels again.

"Mebuki-senpai..."

At the sight of Aya's uneasy face, Mebuki tried responding as normally as she could.

"Don't worry, Aya-chan. We'll protect you".

Then she turned to the Sentinels around her and raised her voice.

"Prepare for retreat! As of this moment I'm transferring my right to command to the 7 remaining officer-types! Numbers 2 to 8, lead the rest of the Sentinels and the Miko and ensure everyone gets back to the wall safely!"

The 7 other officer Sentinels nodded. In case Mebuki could, for whatever reason, not command the squad, the seven of them were to lead it in her stead. For that reason, they were given the titles of officer-types.

"Commence retreat!"

At Mebuki's command, the Sentinels headed back towards the wall along with Aya. She always had at least three people positioned around her to protect from a possible surprise attack by the Stardust.

The rest of the Sentinels having left, Yumiko remained at Mebuki's side.

"Mebuki-san. What are you planning to do now?"

Since Scorpio's attacks have stopped, Suzume returned to Mebuki as well.

"I-I'm aliiiiive! Mebu, let's run! Run away, right now, this instant, straight towards the wall!"

Mebuki shook her head.

"I'm going to take the rear guard of the retreat and protect the rest from Scorpio. And..."

Mebuki glanced at SHIZUKU, who was sent flying by Scorpio's tail swing and was lying sprawled on the ground.

"I'm saving SHIZUKU and getting her back home. My squad will not produce any casualties".

Since she wasn't stabbed by the stinger, she was most likely still alive. But it wasn't clear whether she could get back with her own strength or not.

She would be wary of Scorpio's attacks and recover the fainted SHIZUKU. And then keep the rest of the squad safe as their rear guard while carrying her. It would be an absurdly difficult task. But that was the least she could do as the Sentinel commander

Suzume grabbed her own head.

"Aaah, fine! I got it! I'm going with you, then!"

"Suzume, head back towards the wall. There's no need for you to subject yourself to any more danger".

"I know! I know it's dangerous and I know I should better run! That I'm going to die if I stay here! I'm scared! But I can't leave you alone, Mebu! If you have no shield, who's going to support you!? And I can't leave SHIZUKU alone either!" - wailing like that, Suzume readied her shield.

"It is exactly as Suzume-san says, Mebuki-san. We cannot leave you or Shizuku-san alone. If our squad is not to produce any casualties, then you too must return safely", - standing next to Mebuki, Yumiko readied her rifle.

"Suzume... Miroku-san..."

Yumiko and Suzume stood on both sides of Mebuki.

(...Just when did it become like this?..)

She had people who would fight along side her. And not just any random members of the same squad, forced together by the circumstances. The people standing by her side right now were her comrades, people she could trust.

It wasn't a bad feeling. For Mebuki, it wasn't a bad feeling at all.

Yumiko let out bold smirk.

"Long in the past, Toyotomi Hideyoshi served the role of the rear guard during the Siege of Kanegasaki, which led to him rising through the ranks... Or so I believe. Being the rear guard and rescuing wounded team-mates is a large achievement as well!"

Those words were so like Yumiko, Mebuki couldn't help but let out a wry smile.

"Then, first of all, let's save SHIZUKU!"

Mebuki looked at SHIZUKU... or rather, the place where she was lying, for her figure disappeared from that spot.

After that, too many things took place.

Mebuki and the rest were searching the surroundings, trying to find SHIZUKU. Scorpio has finished regenerating and began its attacks again. Its gigantic sharp needle aimed at the girls once again. Suzume let out an indescribable shriek. The three of them leapt to evade the attack. But SHIZUKU jumped on its tail before it could strike at them, and stabbed the bayonet right into "You shrimp bastard!.. That one hurt! Can't let that go unanswered, can I!?"

SHIZUKU was in no need of saving from Mebuki and the rest. Not only did she regain consciousness already, she was counterattacking the enemy.

"Take thaaaaaaat!" - with the bayonet still lodged inside the tail, she let out several shots and then slashed. But that wasn't enough to completely cut it off. Scorpio swung its tail and flung her off. SHIZUKU's body spun through the air, and she landed right next to the others.

"SHIZUKU~! I'm glad you're saaafe!"

SHIZUKU S looked at the crying Suzume with a troubled expression: "The hell's up with your face? Wipe those tears and snot! And did ya even want me to be alive that much?"

"But you know, if we had to carry you back, it would be really hard for me to come home alive! I'm glad you can move on your ooown!~"

"You... And here I was thinking you were worried about me, but it's still yourself you're concerned about, huh. Well, it's just like you".

The next moment, Scorpio's giant stinger flew at Mebuki's group.

"Waaaaah!" - at Suzume's scream, all four of them jumped away and evaded the attack. But then the tail swung sideways, and closed in to Mebuki and Yumiko.

"Guh!"

The two guarded with their rifles and evaded being hit directly, but were still

blown away by the sheer force of the strike and hit the ground.

Suzume's scream resounded like a siren.

"Uuuugh..."

Had Mebuki not gotten in a proper falling position in that nick of time, her bones and insides would probably be a jumbled mess right now.

But there was no time to stop, she had to get up and evade the pursuing stinger right away.

"Don'tcha forget about me!"

SHIZUKU started shooting at Scorpio. The guns of the Sentinels could inflict minor wounds to the Vertexes at best. But that was enough power to at least stave off the tail approaching Mebuki and Yumiko.

"Uuuuh... That attack just now certainly did hurt..."

They weren't hit directly, but both Mebuki and Yumiko took fairly heavy damage. Especially Yumiko, seemingly having failed to land properly, who was holding her shoulder with a pained grimace.

"Anyway, that stinger on the tail is bad news! If you get stung even once, you'll die for sure!" - said Suzume with teary eyes. Yumiko looked at Scorpio with irritation.

"Precisely. If only not for that stinger, this would go far easier..."

"I'll cut it them off. The stinger and the tail".

"Kusunoki, can you?"

"Yeah, I think so. As long as you help me".

Mebuki's abilities, they agreed to the plan.

"Well... Here I go."

Scorpio paid their scheming no attention, and mercilessly launched its tail and stinger at them again.

"This is just for now! I'm never, you hear, never doing anything this dangerous

agaaaaaaain!" - with a scream, Suzume evaded the attack using her shield.

The next moment it headed for Mebuki and the rest. With sharp enough sense of balance and reflexes, jumping on it was a possibility, the same way SHIZUKU did just before.

And so Mebuki did exactly that.

(If I just attack the same way SHIZUKU did, I won't be able to deal enough damage to the tail. But...)

Scorpio's tail was made up of multiple balls connected together. Mebuki slashed her bayonet right between two of them. The joint was a lot thinner than the spheres itself, and was likely to be much more susceptible to damage.

But even so, it did not cut in one slash. Mebuki attacked a second time, then a third time. The tail swung with incredible force. Mebuki couldn't hold on, and was thrown onto the ground.

"Guh!"

The impact with the hard ground distorted her face with pain. But she wouldn't give up after just one failure. Tenacity and repetition were Mebuki's mottos. She stood up and came next to Suzume.

"Suzume! One more time!"

"Eeeeh!?"

Scorpio's tail aimed for Mebuki again.

"T-this is definitely the last time! I won't be doing anything this dangerous a third tijiime~!"

Suzume once again used her shield to divert Scorpio's tail, and once again Mebuki leapt onto it. To not be shaken off as easily this time, she grabbed onto it instead of standing on it. Clinging to its surface, she kept doing small slashes on the joint part, as if shaving it off.

Realising it can't shake her off, Scorpio bent its tail and aimed at Mebuki with its stinger. But SHIZUKU and Yumiko knocked the attack off its path with gunfire.

"Dammit, if these guns were more powerful, we wouldn't be stuck here shooting our asses off just to slightly knock it away!"

"I beg that you hurry up, Mebuki-san! This shall not last long!"

"I know! Just a bit more!"

With SHIZUKU and Yumiko providing covering fire, Mebuki kept slashing at the tail joint.

"And this is... IT!"

After countless repetitions, the tail finally came apart. Mebuki jumped off the stump and landed next to the others. Having hit the ground several times, she was covered in bruises, but the enemy's attack power fell significantly.

"Take care of the tail swings and retreat while covering for the rest of the squad now!"

"We can finally run awaaaaay!~"

"I should have been the one to slice its tail off! Mebuki-san, you stole my spotlight yet again!"

"Hey, you wreck of a princess! Stop blabbering and get your move on!" - SHIZUKU grabbed Yumiko's arm and dragged her along.

The four of them ran towards the rest of the squad. And protecting its rear, they finally reached the wall.

"Mebuki-senpai, Yumiko-senpai, Suzume-senpai, SHIZUKU-senpai... I'm so glad... I'm so glad you're alright..." - Aya clinged to Mebuki with teary eyes.

The thirty two Sentinels and one Miko have successfully returned inside the barrier, all of them alive.

"Don't exaggerate, Aya-chan."

"I'm not exaggerating! You protected our rear, that's the most dangerous role! And even the Scorpio Vertex appeared! Do you know how worried I was...Uuuh..."

Since Aya was the most vulnerable to attacks of the Stardust and the Vertexes, she was at the middle of the group during the retreat. From there,

she couldn't see their rear. Unable to know what happened to Mebuki's group, she was anxious all that time.

The four girls hardly returned inside the barrier unharmed. They were covered with scratches, cuts, burns and were bleeding.

Slicing off the lethal stinger did not mean Scorpio was rendered harmless. Even without it, its massive tail was a formidable weapon in its own right. Mebuki's group was hit by it time over time and thrown onto the scalding ground. But even so, the four of them didn't let Scorpio approach the retreating squad even once.

But it wasn't just Mebuki's rear guard that was covered in wounds. The rest of the Sentinels engaged a large group of Stardust while retreating and protecting Aya. As a result, there wasn't a single of them not wounded in some way.

However... The number of casualties was zero. Without a single one of them dying, they accomplished their duty once again. Mebuki looked over the beat-up Sentinels and said: "Everyone, I'm really glad that you returned back alive... Thank you for staying alive".

Mebuki was happy that everyone here was safe, and not simply as the commander entrusted with the squad. No matter the Taisha's treatment, every single Sentinel came back alive.

They wouldn't ever stand in the center stage. Disposable tools for performing dull and plain but at the same time painful and dangerous duties. The Taisha didn't recognise them personally. They weren't named flowers, but were lumped together into unremarkable "weeds". But every single one of them, even if not basking in the sun's rays, was doing their best to live. And those lives weren't made to be taken away.

"What are you saying? We should be the one thanking you, Kusunoki-san", - one of the officers smiled, her face covered in scratches.

"The reason we're all still alive is because of you, Kusunoki-san. You took command of us and didn't let anyone die", - said another girl in a bright voice.

"And we all survived until now because we properly trained and became stronger. And we got stronger thanks to you, too, Kusunoki-san. You were

training so earnestly every day, it was impossible to look at you and not train hard as well. And the thing you said right before this mission really spoke to me".

"We have to protect ourselves on our own... It's just as you said, Kusunokisan", - said the girl Mebuki defeated in training right before this mission of theirs started.

"The Taisha people probably don't care about what happens to us. So we have no choice but to get stronger and survive".

"Kusunoki-san, you're pretty harsh even in training, so handling that was hard... But thanks to that, I'm still alive".

The reaction of the Sentinels was unanimous.

"...Thank you".

Mebuki couldn't say anything more.

During both her time as a hero candidate and her time in an ordinary middle school, Mebuki was alone. She got used to being by herself, and there was almost no one who could keep up with her overly stoic personality. Even here in the Sentinel squad there wasn't anyone who could completely keep the pace with her and walk by her side. She was resolved to keep being alone at the lead. But even if there was nobody who could walk side by side with her... There were now people who walked right behind her, gazing at her back.

The thirty one Sentinels were following right behind Mebuki.

Not just those walking side by side with you are your comrades.

So are the ones following behind you.

And those following behind Mebuki were her support.

Mebuki faced her comrades and said once again: "Thank you, everyone..."

Mebuki, Suzume, Yumiko and Shizuku - the four of them were admitted to a Taisha-controlled hospital in Ootsuka and undertook a variety of tests.

They were more injured than the rest of the Sentinels and had slight burns all over their bodies.

"This is..."

The priestess that arrived at the hospital to get a report on their condition let out a voice of slight bewilderment. But since her face was covered by a mask, it was impossible to tell her true thoughts. Until now, not a single Sentinel has been found to have burns on their bodies. During the mission, Mebuki felt heat more intense than during any of their previous sorties outside the barrier. It wasn't just her imagination. The heat outside the barrier exceeded the battle suits' protection capabilities.

It was decided that the four girls would stay in the hospital until their burns healed Mebuki protested against the hospitalisation. The time spent lying on the bed was time better spent training. A day of training missed would take a lot of time to catch up on. She had no leisure of lying in a hospital if she was to become a Hero.

But the Taisha didn't heed her protests. "Resting and preparing for your next mission is also a part of your duties", - or so she has been told.

Rest.

What an unfamiliar word that was.

Mebuki was lying on her bed, awfully perplexed.

(Rest... What am I even supposed to do?)

For Mebuki, who was leading a tense way of life all this time, the concept of "rest" was restricted to breaks between training.

Passing time without doing anything and resting your body, while regaining your energy... That wasn't a thing Mebuki has ever attempted.

But on top of being ordered to "rest" by the Taisha, it's not as if she could simply escape from the hospital.

And after some time spent thinking...

(Okay, then I'll spend this time image training and studying tactics.)

So decided Mebuki.

Most people would realise that was not "rest" at all.

Mebuki was laying in her bed reading books about group battles and squad manoeuvres when Yumiko, in the bed opposite of hers, started talking.

"You are quite like skipjack tuna, Mebuki-san".

"I'm sorry, what? Tuna?"

Mebuki's puzzled face was for some reason met with an expression of triumph from Yumiko.

"Oh my, are you not aware? If skipjack tuna stop swimming, they die. And you cannot settle down unless you are exerting yourself. Thus, you are just like tuna".

"No, no, Miroku-san. You can't just compare a girl to a tuna, now can you?" - said Suzume with amazement from the bed next to Mebuki's.

All four of their beds were in the same hospital room.

"T-that was a form of praise! Is being likened to skipjack tuna not a wondrous compliment!?"

"If you're going to compare her to tuna, then being compared to a mandarin would be way better!"

"What sort of competition are you trying to make this!?"

"Right, Mebu? Being a mandarin would make you happier than a tuna, right!?"

From the bottommost depths of her heart, Mebuki could not possibly care less.

Diagonally from Mebuki was Shizuku's bed. It was the quiet one this time.

"...Ramen would be better" - muttered Shizuku. The arguing Suzume and Yumiko couldn't hear her, but Mebuki could faintly tell those words apart.

"Come on, Mebu! Answer me! Mandarins or tuna, what is better!?" - said Suzume, standing up on her bed.

Then the door of the room opened, and Aya came in.

"Hee-hee, Suzume-senpai, Miroku-senpai, I could hear you from the hallway".

After hearing Aya's words, Suzume and Yumiko's faces flushed in embarassment and went silent.

Aya brought them fruits as get-well gifts.

"I don't have any skipjack tuna, but I've got some mandarins here. Here you go, Suzume-senpai".

"Thanks, Ayaya~! I've been suffering from a mandarin deficiency~!" - Suzume affectionately rubbed the mandarin she got from Aya against her cheek.

"Hmph... So be it! Once we are discharged from the hospital, I shall have our butler Alfred arrange a skipjack tuna party! An elegant one, truly befitting of the esteemed Miroku family!"

"Are you still going to try and keep that rich girl backstory up? That butler is probably imaginary too".

"I keep telling you, Suzume-san, it is not a backstory! Once the Miroku house is restored to its former glory through my actions... It shall become reality!"

Aya looked at the exchange between the two, smiling.

"And so, Kokudo-san, when shall we be allowed to leave this hospital!? Without us, the missions cannot very well continue, can they?"

"Mebu not being there is one thing, but is you being absent really a problem?"

"Suzume-san... Every night from this one onwards I am going to squeeze mandarin juice in your eyes while you are asleep".

"Dooon't! Not the juice, it'll really hurt! Save me, Mebuuu~!"

The hospital room was noisy.

But that noise wasn't an unpleasant one.

"And about your duty, the Taisha said the date of the next mission was still under consideration. But anyway, there will be no missions until you make a full recovery. Please just rest for now".

"But we're fine. Those injuries weren't anything serious".

"I said no! Injuries and fatigue accumulate in your body! If anything happened

to either of you, I..." - tears welled up in Aya's eyes.

"Ah, Mebu! You made Ayaya cry!"

"I didn't! Okay, fine, we'll rest!"

In any case, their next assignment was still a long way away. It looked like Mebuki would have to deal with this period of boredom in the hospital.

The four girls' hospital room saw visitors every day. The one who came most often was Aya, who visited them almost every single day. And on the third day, the entire Sentinel squad came.

"Kusunoki-san, we're here to visit!"

"This room gets pretty cramped if thirty-something people are in it at once!"

"Say, say, you fought with that scorpion-like Vertex, right, Kusunoki-san?"

"I was so scared of it I wet myself a little... You're totally awesome".

"Okay, you all, queue up in the hallway". Come into the room one by one and follow the order".

Mebuki, however, told all of the visiting Sentinels that if they have time to visit the hospital, they should spend it on training instead.

It was a blunt response, but having spent ample time with Mebuki, the girls got a grasp on her personality already.

"Aha, that's exactly what our great commander would say!"

"Get well and return soon. It feels like something's missing without your brutal training, Kusunoki-san".

The girls' words made Mebuki let out a slight smile.

"...I'll be back soon. It won't be good if either mine or your bodies grow dull".

And just once, the priestess they knew well made a sudden visit to the hospital. Mebuki was ready to finally be told the date of their next assignment.

However, she said nothing about their mission. She just came to examine the girls' condition and palpate their injuries. After doing so, she left the room, without having said a single word.

"...Just what occured just now?" - Yumiko and Suzume's expressions were puzzled.

Shizuku slightly tilted her head and murmured: "...A get-well visit?"

Could it have been, as Shizuku said, her way of visiting them?

(...Yeah, no way. She doesn't view us Sentinels as anything more than tools, why would she bother looking out for us?)

Surely she must've just come to examine their recovery in order to plan the next assignment.

A week has passed by without any information from the Taisha. When the girls were talking about how they probably should be let out of the hospital already, Aya came in to visit, carrying a lock.

"What's that?" - Mebuki made a confused expression.

It was a padlock, slightly big.

"You see, Mebuki-senpai, this is something that's popular with the Sentinels lately. It's a form of ritual that's been conducted in the Gold Tower during the Old Era. You write down your names together with people important to you on the lock and then close it. That way, the bonds with the people whose names are written on the lock will never break".

"Huh..."

"Originally this was something lovers did, apparently. But everyone has been writing their friends' names on these and putting them on the viewing platform of the Tower. The locks used during for this ritual back then used to be special heart-shaped ones, but since they're hard to come by, everyone just uses regular padlocks".

"That sounds fun! If everyone's gonna do it, I'm in!" - Suzume sat up on her bed, took the padlock Aya brought and started scribbling her name on it with a marker.

"Kagajou Suzume... Okay, Mebu, you're next", - Suzume held out the lock and the marker towards Mebuki.

"I... don't really care".

"Eeeh, but it'll feel lonely if I'm the only one who writes anything! Come on, write it~!"

In the end, Mebuki submitted to Suzume's persuasion and wrote her name on the lock.

Kusunoki Mebuki.

"Oh, if even Mebuki-san wrote her name, then it would be unbefitting of me not to do the same!" - Yumiko came along and started writing.

"Miroku Yumiko...here. Wonderful, these letters truly portray the greatness of the Miroku family".

"Why did you write the "Miroku" word in such big letters?"

"Is it not natural, Suzume-san? A name as great as that must be recorded with equal splendour!"

"...Too big, I'll wipe it off".

"You really shall not learn until I squeeze some mandarin juice in your eyes, shall you, Suzume-san!?"

"Stooop~ iiit~!"

While Suzume and Yumiko were grappling on the bed, Aya took the lock and wrote her name on it.

"Kokudo Aya... there. Shizuku-san, you too", - Aya handed the lock and the marker to Shizuku who was lying in her bed and reading a book.

"...Me?" - asked Shizuku with a blank expression.

"Yeah, of course. Come on, write your name with everyone", - smiled Aya, and Shizuku nodded.

And then two names were written on the lock. Yamabushi Shizuku and Yamabushi SHIZUKU.

"...If it's everyone... Then she should be here too..."

And so, six names were lined up on the lock.

Aya held it in her hands as gently as if it was a precious gemstone.

"If anyone was lost during your duties, there wouldn't be six names on it right now. It's a miracle, an amazing one. The fact all of you are safe... Makes me happier than anything".

Aya was slightly tearing up. She took the lock and returned. Aya said she would keep it safe in the tower.

The time in the hospital flew unexpectedly quickly. Mebuki thought that spending time without training, doing absolutely nothing would make her irritated. But every day someone came to visit them, and Suzume and Yumiko quarrelled all the time.

The time flowing inside that white hospital room was unexpectedly noisy and lively. There was almost no time when she was bored. But one thing still struck her as strange - there was still no notification about their next mission.

And soon, the four girls were discharged from the hospital and returned to the Gold Tower.

"And so we make our triumphant return! And no doubt, the rest of the Sentinels were counting hours until I would be back!"

"They'll probably think "Whoa, the noisy one came back..." or something like that".

"Su! Zu! Me! San!"

It was unclear whether Suzume and Yumiko got along really well or really badly.

One of the Sentinels was waiting for them near the entrance of the Tower.

"Hey, welcome back, you all. Anyway, come to the viewing platform, quick!"

"The platform? What, has the date of the next mission finally been decided upon?" - Mebuki's body stiffened. She expected the priestess to finally tell them the details of their next assignment.

But what awaited her there was not the sight of the priestess, but the sound of dozens of poppers.

"Welcome back, Kusunoki-san!"

"We've been waiting!"

"Congrats on your recovery!"

The Sentinels spoke in a disjointed unison.

Mebuki's ears was slightly ringing from the sound of the poppers and her eyes were widened. The viewing platform was outfitted with tables, which had drinks, sweets and a cake set upon them.

"What's this?.."

Suzume, Yumiko and Shizuku had confusion written on their faces as well.

Aya, who was standing amongst the Sentinels with a cracker in hand, started happily explaining.

"We decided to celebrate your return! The four of you played the most important and dangerous role last time, so this is our way of saying thanks".

"... That was something natural to do as the leader of the squad".

Mebuki just performed her duties. It wasn't anything special.

"Even so, Mebuki-san, Suzume-san, Yumiko-san, Shizuku-san, all of you protected us!" - a Sentinel followed up on Aya's words.

"Alright, to your recovery!"

Everyone took up a cup and drank in celebration.

After that, the four of them were surrounded by the rest of the Sentinels. "Thank you for protecting us" - thanked them some. "You four really are amazing" - praised them the others.

Ever since Mebuki became obsessed with the title of a Hero and devoted herself to training for that sake, she hasn't ever attended anything like a party. She was a bit lost.

With her low self-esteem, Suzume wasn't used to being praised by so many people, and was all shook up.

"Uh, uh, I-I just ran away! If it wasn't for Mebu, I would've died!"

Yumiko, on the other hand, was boastfully talking to the rest of them.

"It is only natural for a daughter of the esteemed Miroku family to protect those around her! That, my friends, is what we call noblesse oblige!"

Shizuku kept her usual silent emotionless expression, but didn't stray far away from Mebuki, most likely being lost at such an unfamiliar situation.

And the one of the Sentinels came up to Mebuki and said: "Kusunoki-san, you're just like a Hero".

"...Eh?"

Mebuki's eyes widened.

"I mean, you stood up against a Vertex and didn't lose, right? They said that we Sentinels can't handle them, but you fought against it. Only the Heroes can do something like that. So you're just about as amazing as them!"

"Yeah, you're really like a Hero!"

"I think so too!"

The rest of the Sentinels started speaking out in agreement.

"...T-thank you..." - squeezed out of herself Mebuki, unable to think of anything else to say.

The lively celebration party came to an end.

When the night came, Mebuki went up to the platform by herself. The noise of the celebration might have stopped, but the whirlpool of unfamiliar emotions raged inside Mebuki's chest.

Embarrassment. Happiness. Discomfort. Mebuki wasn't used to any of those feelings that can only be born from interacting with others. Unable to calm down and sleep, she decided to get some fresh air at the viewing platform.

In the corner of the platform stood the object everyone hanged their padlocks on. Just as Aya said, there were more than a dozen of them attached to it. And in front of them stood Shizuku.

"Shizuku? What are you doing here?"

At the sound of Mebuki's voice Shizuku turned around.

"...I was looking at this".

Shizuku pointed at one of the hanging locks. It was the one they wrote at in the hospital, with 6 names written on it. Mebuki looked at it and let out a wry smile.

"We stuffed six names onto just one lock, so it looks kind of shabby, doesn't it?"

Kagajou Suzume. Kusunoki Mebuki. Miroku Yumiko. Kokudo Aya. Yamabushi Shizuku. Yamabushi SHIZUKU.

The other locks had two or three names written on them at most.

"...But I'm glad", - murmured out Shizuku.

"...Thank you for accepting the other me... As well..."

"SHIZUKU is a member of the Sentinels as well".

"...Kusunoki, do you mind listening to something?"

Shizuku has started speaking, with frequent breaks.

"My family was...n't very happy".

The house she grew up in had a lot of problems. Her parents were both unstable and would fly into a fit of rage at the smallest thing. And Shizuku received violence frequently.

"...So I tried to be... As quiet as possible..."

Not showing any emotions, not saying anything. Doing that, she was able to slightly reduce her parents' anger. But only slightly. As her parents' abuse continued, Shizuku has started developing a personality strong enough to withstand it.

"...That was... SHIZUKU".

Strong and wild. The other Yamabushi Shizuku.

Because she was there, Shizuku could bear living in her family circumstances. For Shizuku, she was her most loyal supporter and best friend.

But SHIZUKU was alone. In the first place, nobody would accept a split personality born inside someone as a separate person. And even when SHIZUKU came to the front, she couldn't get along with anyone because of her rough

character.

"But Kusunoki. You accepted her".

Mebuki took SHIZUKU head-on and reconciled with her. Until then, nobody else was able to do that.

"SHIZUKU also... Said she was glad to have met you".

"It's not as if I dislike her either".

"Thank you..."

Shizuku stared at Mebuki.

"...I think you're a hero. Too".

The words said by the Sentinels earlier this day.

Shizuku grabbed Mebuki's sleeve.

"...If... You become a Hero, Kusunoki... I still want you to be the leader of the Sentinels..."

"..."

When Mebuki arrived at the Gold Tower, she resolved that she wouldn't stay there forever. That she would become a hero and leave this Sentinel group.

But Mebuki right now was different.

"You're right. I'll definitely become a hero. Become one and lead the rest of the Sentinels".

They were still not informed of their next mission. The days kept passing by.

Mebuki, having fully recovered, returned to her usual lifestyle. Harsh exercise, lessons and training as a squad to prepare for their next mission. What she did didn't change at all. Her emotions, on the other hand, changed.

The time she spent with her comrades filled her with warmth she's never experienced before. Mebuki has resolved - she wouldn't allow a single one of those comrades giving her that warmth to perish.

Those days, this daily life - they were irreplaceable, precious things.

Kokudo Aya said: "I haven't ever met the Heroes in person, but I've heard a lot

about their personalities and achievements".

"I thought Miyoshi-san was no different from me..."

"Yeah, the Heroes are no different from any other normal person. During the time of the first Heroes, and the previous generation, there must've been people stronger than them in fighting power. But... The Heroes treasured the time spent with their comrades more than anything".

"..."

"And since they treasured their comrades and daily life, they fought to protect them".

"...I think I started understanding now. The reason I wasn't selected to be a hero".

They were still not informed of their next mission.

Because Kagajou Suzume fought and survived against the Vertexes, the opinion of her amongst the Sentinels has skyrocketed. And in the protector squad, a rumour that Suzume is actually the hidden strongest Sentinel has started circulating.

"If anything happens, Kagajou-san will protect us!" - so said the protectors occasionally.

"They're wrong! Wrooong! Why are they misunderstanding everything!? I'm weak! I'm really weak! If you don't protect me, I'll definitely dieee! Mebuuu~!" - was complaining Suzume in tears during one of her many visits to Mebuki's room.

They were still not informed of their next mission.

In rivalry with Mebuki, Miroku Yumiko has decided to accompany her during her morning and evening exercise. In the morning, running, shooting practice and bayonet drills. In the evening, fundamental strength training and image training.

```
"Mebuki-san..."
```

<sup>&</sup>quot;What is it?"

On one morning, Yumiko suddenly called out to her during the run.

"I, too, do not think you are not undeserving of not being called a Hero, Mebuki-san".

"...What?"

That line was so roundabout, she didn't really understand its meaning.

Yumiko's cheeks flushed.

"I-I mean the same thing as what the rest of the Sentinels said before... That I think you are a Hero as well!"

They were still not informed of their next mission.

That day during breakfast, Aya's expression was stiff for some reason.

"What's wrong, Aya-chan?"

Aya answered Mebuki's words with a smile, albeit still a stiff one.

"It's nothing. Oh, by the way, I'm going to to the Taisha later today, since I have Miko duties".

Mebuki and the rest were still not informed of their next mission.

Inside one of the Taisha buildings six Mikos were assembled, including Aya. One of the priests started speaking. He had a mask on, but his voice was audibly trembling.

"Something beyond our wildest beliefs has occurred. It has been decided that we are to cancel all the plans currently underway... And conduct the Fire Offering Ceremony".

(Chapter 5 end)



## **Chapter 6 - A lotus blossoming through dirt**

Today, again, the thirty-two girls were standing atop the wall.

"It really is the middle of winter... The air is cold. And that's despite the scorching hellscape outside of the barrier... Well, not that the seasons change our duty in any way".

Starting with Mebuki, the girls started putting on their combat suits and headed outside the wall.

This story is not of flowers blooming in splendour, but that of nameless weeds.

And a record of how a girl who yearned for the title of a "Hero" aimed to become a true one...

|========|

Divine Era year 300, late autumn. Having successfully planted a seed outside the barrier and established a bridgehead, the Sentinels were waiting for their next assignment. But none could have predicted the news that came.

"Fire Offering Festival?.."

Puzzled expressions started appearing on the faces of the Sentinels gathered at the Gold Tower's viewing platform after the priestess uttered those unfamiliar words.

A festival of offering to the fire. This duty would not be shouldered by the Sentinels, but by the Mikos.

They had no idea what kind of festival it would be, but for the Sentinels the word "fire" was deeply associated with the world outside. Unease started swirling in Mebuki's heart.

Aya was standing next to the priestess. Her head was pointed down, and her

expression wasn't visible.

"W-When you say festival you mean like, the one with stalls and fireworks, right?"

Suzume forced a cheerful voice out of herself, but her words were immediately sunk by the heavy atmosphere around.

"Of course you don't, sorry..."

Suzume apologised and went silent.

The priestess continued, her voice as devoid of emotion as ever.

"The Fire Offering Festival was a ritual carried out around 300 years ago. Out of all the ceremonies conducted by the Taisha, it is one of the most grandiose ones in history - a ritual of begging the heavenly gods for forgiveness".

Mebuki never expected to hear anything of the sort. Beg the heavenly gods for forgiveness? Was humanity not putting up a desperate struggle against them and fighting for that sake? Was that not the reason the Sentinels endured pain and danger, time and time again? But then why? How could this turn into them begging for forgiveness?

The priestess carried on.

"The effectiveness of this ceremony in appeasing the heavenly gods has been confirmed in the past. At the end of the Christian Era, after many of the Heroes had lost their lives and the attacks grew in intensity, mankind stood at the brink of extinction. But then the Festival was conducted, and humanity prayed for forgiveness. Humanity, Shinju-sama and the heavenly gods achieved reconciliation, and on the condition mankind was not to leave Shikoku, peace was granted to it".

"Reconciliation?.. Are you saying humanity negotiated with the gods? But how?"

Mebuki's question was met with an answer, devoid of any feeling.

"Mikos were burned in the flames outside the barrier as sacrifices. That way, the pleads of humanity reached the heavenly gods".

"Through their oracles, the Mikos possess an ability to understand Shinjusama. But those oracles are, in the end, a one-way transmission. Conveying human will to Shinju-sama is no easy task. Let alone to the heavenly gods, much further away than it. And so the only way to convey human words to them... was sacrificing one's own life".

"So they were just slaughtered!?"

"That's right. And Kokudo-san has been selected to be one of the sacrifices in the Fire Offering Festival".

Other Sentinels began to get riled up by the argument. But amidst the tension filling the room, Aya alone stayed silent, simply pointing her face down.

(Sacrifice? Aya-chan? Into that fire?)

What was that?

What was that absurdity? That nonsense?

The priestess' speech continued.

"Through the Fire Offering Festival at the end of the Christian Era, forgiveness was granted to mankind, the Vertexes perished and humanity was permitted to survive inside the barrier surrounding Shikoku. However... After year 270 of the Divine Era, the Vertexes have again became visible outside the world. And at the end of year 298 they... began attacking again".

The history of the world from the Christian Era until the present day. She continued telling it to the girls.

Perhaps, had they held a Fire Offering Festival in DE 270, the current invasion of the Vertexes might have never occured. But there was no certainty in that. And there is no "if" in history.

But the war of mankind against the heavenly gods was not an unexpected occurrence. Quite the opposite, the Taisha has sworn to someday take the world that was stolen from humanity back. And for that purpose, they continued updating the Hero System in secret.

It took around 300 years.

An immense amount of time and the efforts and blood of countless people

have culminated in the Heroes finally possessing power equal to the Vertexes, or possibly even higher. And with that power, they intercepted the vanguard forces sent by the heavenly gods towards Shikoku.

The previous Heroes: Washio Sumi, Nogi Sonoko, Minowa Gin.

The current Heroes: Yuuki Yuuna, Tougou Mimori, Inubouzaki Fuu, Inubouzaki Itsuki, Miyoshi Karin.

Their bonds and struggles have proved to the Taisha and Shinju-sama the capabilities human beings possess, and allowed a further upgrade of the Hero System.

And then, they reached the present.

The Taisha's goal has advanced past interception to the next stage. The new plan was... to reclaim Shikoku with everyone's strength.

But how was that to be done?

The plan the Taisha devised was a ritual of Kuni-zukuri. (Transfer of the land) The Shinju-sama was an agglomeration of the heavenly gods. And that ritual was linked to one of the gods who worshipped another at the sacred mountain in the former Kinki region.

During the age of the gods, the ruler of the land gods did the same.

"Go yonder, towards the mountain east of Yamato's Aogaki, and make a place of worship there". Thus the land became that of plentiful reeds and bountiful rice grains - Toyoashihara-no-mizuho-no-kuni.

And so man has chosen to imitate the legends, and recreate what happened back then. Which is, to turn the land outside the barrier into "a land of plentiful reeds and bountiful rice grains". A form of sympathetic magic - this was the nature of the Kuni-zukuri ritual. The world outside Shikoku had its very logic rewritten by the heavenly gods and has become a sea of fire. In that case, rewriting it again through the Kuni-zukuri was a possibility.

The voice of the priestess carried no feelings. Or perhaps, just like mixing of many colours results in a dirty grey, the emotions mixing inside her resulted in them all getting extinguished.

"You Sentinels, as well, took part in preparations for the Kuni-zukuri and helped it proceed. One could even say they were proceeding smoothly. There was nothing to impede its progress apart from Stardust and incomplete Vertexes and the goal was already in sight... Or so it seemed". Their investigations of the soil and fires outside of the barrier were to establish the properties of the altered world and determine whether it was possible to revert them through the Kuni-zukuri.

Their planting of the seed and establishment of a bridgehead was to create a path through which the deity could be transferred to the sacred mountain.

All of that was for the sake of Kuni-zukuri.

A part of the great plan to take back the world.

"So something must've happened to interrupt it".

The priestess nodded in response to Mebuki's question.

"We miscalculated. The flames outside the barrier have grown stronger than ever before".

Shock appeared on Mebuki's face.

"Kusunoki-san and those who accompanied her, you should be able to understand. During your last mission, the heat of the flames exceeded the protective capabilities of the combat suits and resulted in you getting burns. If the fire keeps growing stronger, there is a possibility that it will engulf all of Shikoku, barrier notwithstanding".

"Why... Did something like that happen?"

"According to the oracles received by the Mikos, due to the fury of the heavenly gods. Because humanity continued to press forward with its plans of opposing them and because one of the current Heroes has breached Shinjusama's wall. The wall surrounding Shikoku is not only a barrier protecting mankind - it is also a cage binding it to the pledge of "not leaving Shikoku" made during the Christian Era. And on top of breaking through that, mankind has continued to develop plans of opposing the heavenly gods in secrecy... And thus, incurred their wrath. And now, there are signs that heavenly gods themselves are about to manifest".

In the Christian Era, the eradication of mankind was conducted by the vanguard force - the Vertexes. The heavenly gods themselves had never appeared.

"What fools you are!"

Miroku Yumiko shouted, her patience finally reaching its limits. She yelled directly at the priestess, clearly older than herself. That was the least she could do to express her anger at the Taisha's thoughtlessness.

"Forget the ritual of Kuni-zukuri, you had not informed us of anything! One cannot help but be angered by that... But your most inexcusable doing is your sloppiness with your plans! The Heroes are fighting the Vertexes, the Sentinels are gloriously marching outside the barrier and you progress the ritual in haste... How could the enemy not be infuriated by that? Did it not strike you that plans are to be carried out meticulously!?"

"Miroku Yumiko-san".

Even under the verbal assault of the girl, the priestess' voice did not tremble.

"From your standpoint, I'm certain it must look that way. But your way of thinking is one-sided. But from where we stand, the things look different. There was no way for us but to make haste... Shinju-sama's lifespan is much closer to its end than you can imagine".

While prone to being foolhardy, Yumiko was a girl of wisdom. Saying nothing more, she went silent.

"But even so, it is a fact that we Taisha went conceited and careless. Three hundred years have passed since humanity and the heavenly gods reconciled... And the long peace in our garden had us grow dull. The days of the horrible slaughter are a thing of days long past, the Hero system became powerful enough to allow destruction of the Vertexes... The true dread of opposing the heavens must have faded from our minds. We underestimated the gods. It is said that the Hero and Miko from the beginning of our era expected and feared that the Taisha would deteriorate... And I'm afraid that all is as they predicted".

The viewing platform fell into deep silence.

The Heroes could stand up against the Vertexes. But what was appearing this

time were not Vertexes - it was heavenly gods themselves. The possibility of fighting them and being victorious... was unthinkably low.

"The flames outside the barrier will keep growing in their intensity. At this rate, Shikoku will be engulfed in fire, together with the barrier... Right now, all we are capable of is begging the heavenly gods for their forgiveness and preserving this world".

"And that's why you're going to sacrifice them?.."

Mebuki stared at the priestess and asked.

"That's right".

Some of the Sentinels' heads fell, their shoulders trembling. Some glared at the priestess with animosity.

It was unreasonable.

It was far too unjust.

Not a single of the girls making up the Sentinels could accept this.

And so Mebuki, as their representative, raised her voice.

"What is with this conclusion?.. We didn't go through so much pain just so it all could end like this!"

"...This isn't the end".

"Fh?"

"The amount of data you have accumulated through your missions is enormous. It has allowed us to search for various ways out".

"And one of those ways out is sacrificing people?"

"Our thinking lies past the Fire Offering Festival".

"Past... Past the Festival?.."

Mebuki felt it clearly. The woman in front of her understood nothing. Nothing at all!

"There's nothing past it! After you sacrifice someone, there's nothing left! It's not as if you're going to tell anyone what's going to happen after that, but hear

this: no matter how your view of the future looks, there's no point in it! The moment you sacrifice even a single life, even if you have the most brilliant plan ever, it's a failure!"

"...It's fine already, Mebuki-senpai. Thank you."

The one to {stop} Mebuki was the Miko selected to be sacrificed.

"I'm not against the Fire Offering Ceremony. I'm fine with it. I'm happy that I can be of use to Shinju-sama, to everyone. All the time until now, the Heroes and the Sentinels did their best. So now... it's our time to".

Said Kokudo Aya with a smile.

And after being told that the Fire Offering Festival will take place in a week, they were dispersed. After that, Aya left the Tower, accompanied by Taisha personnel.

She was to become a sacrifice.

They would not meet her again.

Mebuki returned to her room, dumbfounded, and thrown her body onto her bed. Normally, she would begin training right after a meeting. But she had no will to do anything.

She felt completely powerless.

That feeling ceased her body so strongly she thought she would never be able to move again.

```
(Was it for nothing... Again?..)
```

Just like back then... When all of her earnestness and efforts to become a Hero were denied by a single word. All of her efforts were made pointless.

As a Sentinel, she did everything she could to not let a single one of them die. And now, at the end of their missions, Aya was chosen to be sacrificed in the Fire Offering Ceremony. Everything she did was made pointless once again.

```
(All of it... For nothing?)
```

• • •

. . . . .

```
"Bullshit!.. I'm not done for yet!.."

Mebuki clenched her teeth and moved, as is whipping her body that's grown heavy.

She wouldn't let this end.
```

The Festival was not yet held. Aya was not yet sacrificed.

"It's not over yet! I won't let it be over!"

Mebuki sprung up and left her room.

"Suzume!"

Mebuki flung open the door to Suzume's room and stormed in.

"W-What?"

"Come to the viewing platform, right now!"

"Eh? O-Okay!"

While startled by Mebuki's menacing look, Suzume immediately sprung to her feet.

"Miroku-san!"

Miroku was drinking black tea in her room.

"What is it?"

"Please come to the viewing platform!"

"Certainly. I was already expecting you to make a move soon".

"Shizuku!"

"?.."

Shizuku turned her head to Mebuki, who entered the room with a loud bang.

"Come to the viewing platform".

"..."

Shizuku silently nodded.

Calling on all of the Sentinels, she gathered all of them at the viewing

platform.

Standing before thirty-one other girls, Mebuki began her speech.

"I cannot accept the Taisha's decision! What about you!?"

The Sentinels started exchanging glances and murmuring. They weren't sure what answer to give.

Then, Suzume raised her voice.

"...Of c "...Of course I don't... Accept Ayaya being a sacrifice..."

Suzume spoke with her head down, her voice soaked with frustration.

"You know, when I just started being a Sentinel, Ayaya never made fun of me no matter how much I got scared or how pathetic I was. She told me how amazing I am just for taking up the duty of a Sentinel. She's a great girl! They can't sacrifice her! I won't allow it! ...But the Taisha already made the decision..."

Yumiko started speaking.

"I am the daughter of the formerly distinguished Miroku family. Few know the name of it now. And those that do speak of it in tones steeped in ridicule: "Aah, those Mirokus, huh". Especially those from noble families and affliated with the Taisha. But... Kokudo-san was different. She accepted the pride of the Miroku family... My pride... It is not acceptable for such a girl to be sacrificed".

"...Kokudo is a good girl... Shouldn't die..."

Mumbled out Shizuku.

The rest of the girls began to speak up. They couldn't accept it. They pitied Aya. Why does that girl have to be sacrificed?

The girl named Kokudo Aya was universally beloved by the Sentinels.

Those who couldn't become Heroes. Those who were treated as disposable pieces by the Taisha. The girls whose worth was not recognised - the Sentinels.

But Aya always treated them with sincerity. She recognised every single one of them and tried to share even the least bit of their burden. She cried, grieved and laughed with them. Her existence was a lifesaver for the Sentinels.

And not a single one of them could accept her sacrifice.

"In that case..."

Mebuki glanced over the Sentinels and raised her voice further.

"In that case, we have to come up with a plan to save Aya-chan! There's still a week until the Fire Offering Festival is conducted! There has to be a way! I won't stand for it! And neither will any of you, am I wrong!? I won't allow anyone in my squad to become a sacrifice!"

Mebuki was stubborn.

She didn't give up on becoming a Hero even after being rejected and transferred to being a Sentinel. And in her stubbornness, she could bring forth infinite resolve.

And so, this time - she wouldn't give up either.

The anger with the injustice of the world and the fury with the Taisha's heartlessness burned hot, moving Mebuki forward.

And the girls in front of her responded to the word of their commander, as true to her nature as ever, with loud shouts of agreement.

And so, the Sentinels talked through the night.

"Maybe we should hide Aya-chan somewhere?"

"Right, someone should kidnap her and run away with her or something".

"That's out. In that case the Taisha will simply find a replacement for her. No one must be sacrificed, at all. Not Aya-chan, not anyone else".

"Then we have to stop the Fire Offering Ceremony itself, right?"

"And how d'ya think the heavenly gods are going to be calmed down then?"

"We must simply take the heavenly gods down ourselves!"

"Nopenopenope, no way, we'll totally die".

"Can't there be some sort of ritual that has the same effect as the Fire Offering Ceremony, but without the sacrifices?"

"If the Taisha, specialists on the divine, didn't find anything, how are we going

to?"

"The chances are low, but there's no other way, right?"

"Are there any books? How are we going to look for info anyway?"

"I reckon the only ones who'd know 'bout that stuff would be the priests and Mikos".

"The priests are all Taisha's pawns, they're not gonna help us".

"What about Mikos? Other than Aya-chan?"

"Can we even get in contact with them?"

No matter how much they talked about it, they couldn't find a working solution. And in the first place, if there was an easy way out, the Taisha would've probably used it already. But the girls couldn't give up. And so they kept groping in the dark for possibilities.

As the fruitless discussion went on, the dawn broke. Mebuki got called to the priestess' room. She assumed that she'd be told to stop the Sentinels' pointless struggle, but the reason was entirely different.

"We want you to retrieve the seed that you have planted outside the barrier last time".

"Retrieve? But why?"

If they took it back, wouldn't the sprouted greenery be engulfed in flame again?

"That seed is a crystallisation of Shinju-sama's blessings. If it's retrieved and returned, a portion of Shinju-sama's power will return. With the Kuni-zukuri project suspended, there is no reason for it to remain outside the barrier. Shinju-sama's power is what allows humans to live and supports the barrier that protects against the flames. Not even the least bit of it can be wasted.

...Wasted. So that mission was for nothing, too.

And so, the Sentinels headed outside the barrier.

"In the days long past, there used to be a prison in a certain country where the people were made to dig holes in the morning and fill them back in in the afternoon".

"Dig holes and them fill them in? What's the point in that?"

Suzume made a confused face.

"Precisely, there is none. It was forced labour simply for the purpose of wearing out one's mind and body. And the situation we find ourselves in now is not far off".

Pointless.

Meaningless.

Futile.

Mebuki let out a sigh.

(Maybe it all... Really is...)

Their search for a way to rescue Aya will probably end in nothing, after all.

There's no way they could find a method the Taisha somehow overlooked in just a week. Thinking rationally, the outcome was clear as day. Their struggles were in vain.

But even so, Mebuki wouldn't give up.

Even knowing the futility of it, she would keep putting up a struggle.

(It's hot...)

Mebuki wiped the sweat pouring down her forehead.

The heat was even stronger than on their last mission.

Mebuki could feel the ire of the heavenly gods burn, quite literally, hotter with her own body.

The Stardust increased in number as well. A group of them headed towards the Sentinels and was drawing closer.

"Gunner squad, take aim! Fire!"

The approaching Stardust were greeted by a fusillade from the Sentinels.

This might have been a pointless mission of digging a hole and filling it up for

them, but that changed nothing for the enemy. To return without a single casualty, they had to proceed with caution.

Since the spot the seed was planted was not too far away, the growing heat didn't pose a significant issue.

In the midst of the blazing wasteland stood an oasis of greenery. The flames near its edges gradually scorched the plants in the green patch, and, let alone, would likely eventually consume it entirely. Mebuki headed towards the center, dug out the buried seed and placed it inside her kagami. Immediately afterwards, the plants went ablaze and the land quickly returned to being scorched and barren.

"Well, we're done here, so let's turn ba-"

"T-T-T-They're hereee~!! Save me, Mebuu~~~~!!"

Suzume's shriek interrupted Mebuki's words.

She turned around. Her eyes widened.

They weren't careless. With their frail equipment, the Sentinels were always prepared for danger. They had to be.

But this situation was not something anyone could have expected. Not an appearance of three Vertexes at once.

Bearing an organ shaped like a white sash and with a swollen lower part - the Virgo Vertex.

The figure possessing four leg-shaped attachments - the Capricorn Vertex.

With three blue fins on its bottom and a semicircular rod around it-the Pisces Vertex.

Strictly speaking, they were not true Vertexes, but incomplete versions lacking a core. But even so, they were an enemy that could wipe out the Sentinel squad on their own. And there was 3 of them.

"What do we do!? What do we do!?"

"What do you think!? Run, of course!"

The seed was already retrieved. All they had to do was return.

"Everyone, retreat! Don't even think about attacking them, just run with all your strength!"

The Sentinels rushed towards the wall.

Virgo, Capricorn, Pisces. A small mercy in this misfortune was the fact neither of them possessed a destructive swift long-ranged attack like Sagittarius or a guaranteed kill attack like Scorpio.

They weren't that far from the wall.

They could make it.

They must make it

They had to end this with no casualties.

Mebuki, in the squad's rear guard, repeated those words in her mind as if a prayer.

The next moment, the earth started shaking with overwhelming power.

"Me-Me-Me-Mebu~!? W-W-W-What's going o-o-on!?"

Screamed Suzume, her voice shaking as fiercely as the ground.

Mebuki turned around.

The Capricorn Vertex has thrust its four leg-like appendages into the ground. That was one of its methods of attacking - an earthquake.

(This is bad! Forget running, with this shaking we won't even be able to leap back!) The ground's tremors reduced the Sentinels' speed to a crawl.

It became distant. The barrier that felt close by suddenly seemed out of reach.

"Gunner squad, take aim at Capricorn! Fire!"

The Sentinels bearing rifles stopped still and pointed their muzzles at Capricorn. Without inflicting damage on it and stopping the ground from shaking, they wouldn't be able to run away.

The twenty four Sentinels, Mebuki included, released a volley of gunshots. But only one or two reached their mark, with the rest veering off into the distance. It was impossible to accurately aim with the ground in such frenzied tremoring. And just one or two shots were not enough to damage Capricorn in to any degree. The earth kept shaking.

"The guns aren't going to cut it! I'll carve him up directly!"

"SHIZUKU!? You won't even get to Capricorn with this shaking! It's too dangerous!"

"No, I can do it!"

A confident smile appeared on SHIZUKU's face.

"You beat me. And I promised to obey you. So your goals are my goals. We've gotta make it out of this with zero casualties, right?"

"SHIZUKU..."

"Uuuuoooooohhh!"

SHIZUKU kicked away. Just as she said, she rushed towards it with impressive speed even amidst the ground quaking. To Mebuki, the sight felt deeply admirable.

If Mebuki's powers were fruits of her diligent training, then SHIZUKU was a prodigy, born with excellent instincts. She could adapt to all sorts of situations and find the right way to deal with them.

Accommodating her body to the shaking of the ground due to her well-developed sense of balance, she kept proceeding forward step by step. That way, SHIZUKU was able to reduce the influence of the shaking on her speed to minimum. But even so, running full force in an earthquake was pretty much impossible, just like running on the water surface without sinking. But she did it.

SHIZUKU, dashing through the quaking earth, finally reached Capricorn.

"Got your legs!"

She slashed at a thin part of one of its leg-like appendages with her bayonet. One slash didn't work, and so she continued slashing away at it until it finally cut off.

Having lost one of its legs, Capricorn lost its balance and fell. At the same time the ground finally stopped.

"How do you like that, hu-"

SHIZUKU's words were stopped by a white sash that sent her flying.

Capricorn wasn't the only Vertex around. Virgo made it clear that it was also here with that attack.

To follow up, Virgo shot out egg-shaped bombs at SHIZUKU who was falling through the air.

"Kuh!"

SHIZUKU readied her gun in midair and made a shot at the bomb flying towards her. The bomb detonated, sparing her the direct hit, but the explosion threw her onto the ground. Not being able to get into a proper position, she crashed onto the wasteland.

Not even giving her a moment of time, Virgo mercilessly shot out more bombs at her. Not a single one, but a dozen of them. The Sentinels' battle suit defense could not withstand those explosions. If they made it, SHIZUKU would die.

(Guess that's it... But that's not bad.)

The thought raced through SHIZUKU's mind as she stared at the approaching bombs.

She managed to stop Capricorn's earthquake. That should let the rest of the Sentinels to get away safely. If she died, then Mebuki's principle of no casualties would break, but the damage was still reduced to minimum.

(Counting on you, Kusunoki. Get the rest of the squad inside the barrier. You oughtta be able to.) With death staring her closely in the face, memories of the past started appearing in her head. SHIZUKU and Shizuku were one and whole, so their memories were shared between the two. And most of those memories were those after she came to the Tower.

Her family circumstances were bad, so there were no happy memories of it to appear. She had no friends at school, so there were barely any memories of it either. But after she came to the Gold Tower...

She got Suzume and Yumiko, her noisy friends. Even though Shizuku wasn't particularly talkative, just being around them was enjoyable and pleasant.

She got Aya, her kind friend. Without making fun of her for her quiet personality, she was always considerate to her.

And she also got Mebuki, who accepted the violent and free-willed SHIZUKU right on, becoming the first equal friend to her. When they fought, SHIZUKU didn't consider Mebuki appropriate to be a Hero, but it wasn't as if she disliked Mebuki herself.

For Shizuku and SHIZUKU, they were important people. She felt fine with

dying herself if it allowed them to live.

But there was one regret still lingering within her.

(My bad, Shizuku. I was born to protect you, and in the end you're gonna die because of me...) But it was not to be. B

"Shizuku-san!"

With a shout, Miroku Yumiko thrust herself between SHIZUKU and the bombs. She cut down several of them, but there was too many.

"Miroku!"

SHIZUKU let out a scream as several of those bombs hit Yumiko. Since she became a shield, not a single one of the attacks got to SHIZUKU. But in return, Yumiko bore the full brunt of them. Sent flying by the explosions, she collapsed onto the ground like a tattered rag. An immense amount of blood was flowing out of the cracks in her battle suit.

Perhaps because of how heavy her injuries were, Yumiko didn't even feel pain. She just couldn't move, paralysed. Not even she herself could understand how heavy her injuries under the suit were. Her skin must have been torn, her flesh rent and her internal organs broken.

"Miroku!"

"Miroku-san!"

SHIZUKU and Mebuki rushed to Yumiko's side.

Virgo swung its sash, aiming to sweep the three of them down. The girls raised Yumiko and leapt back, evading the attack.

"What are you even doing!?"

Mebuki yelled at Yumiko.

Yumiko was barely holding to her consciousness. Even speaking was painful for her, so she had to make pauses.

"We have to... Accomplish this with no casualties... Don't we?.. So Shizukusan... Cannot die either..."

Yumiko coughed up blood. She couldn't even speak anymore. Mebuki and

SHIZUKU supported her as they ran towards the wall.

With the earthquake gone, nothing impeded their retreat anymore. But Yumiko's injuries were too heavy. It wasn't clear whether or not she could be saved even if they made it back.

But even so, Yumiko had no regrets. If she were to die here, her goal of raising her family's prestige by accomplishing the Taisha's ordeals would be left unfulfilled. They would gain some praise for having their daughter nobly sacrifice her life to save her comrades, but that would still be a far cry from the level of the Akamine family.

But even so, Yumiko had no regrets. Certainly, for her returning the Miroku family to its former glory was an important goal. One she would consider giving her life up for. But there was something more important. More important than her family's glory. More important than her own life. It was her way of life as the heiress of the Miroku family. Her sense of duty as a descendant of the legends who saved countless people in the past. And so, Yumiko would protect others. No matter what.

And so, she had no regrets.

(I suppose that... is where me and Mebuki-san were similar...)

Mebuki, who resolved not to let anyone die.

Yumiko, who resolved to protect other people.

Yumiko might have pecked at Mebuki often, but the direction they were heading was the same. And that's why, despite not getting along that well, the two were close to each other.

"Mebuki...san... Become a Hero... That way... The Miroku family... That was nearby... Will remain, too..."

Yumiko lost her consciousness. She wasn't certain if she could say what she wanted properly.

With the ground's tremors stopped, the squad returned to its normal speed. With the officer-type Sentinels at lead, they advanced sufficiently towards the wall. Around 300 meters behind the main force, Mebuki and SHIZUKU were

carrying Yumiko back.

"Don't just entrust me with things on your own!.."

What does she mean, become a Hero? What does she mean, remain?

"Who said I'm going to bother carrying your dream too? Fulfill your dream on your own, Miroku-san! I won't allow you to just die like that!"

Mebuki screamed, but Yumiko gave no answer. She has completely fainted.

With the quaking stopped, the obstacles that remained on their way back were the groups of Stardust, Virgo's bombs and its sash. The first two could be countered by gunshots. The attack of the sash was rough and imprecise, and thus evadable. And so, returning wasn't a huge problem anymore...

That way of thinking was too rash.

The ground swelled up under the legs of the retreating girls, and the head of a giant blue monstrosity appeared from it.

"Pisces!.."

Just like fish can swim through water, Pisces was able to freely swim through the ground. Appearing from below, it blocked their way of retreat with its massive body.

In front of them, Pisces. Behind them, Virgo and Capricorn. They reached a dead end. Virgo spared no time sending bombs towards the three girls who had lost their path of retreat.

"Mebuuuuuu~!"

With a scream, Suzume leapt in. Expanding her shield, she guarded the three from the explosions.

"What are you doing, Mebu!? You can't die here!"

Suzume's face was a wet mess. There was no need for her to return. It would be safer to keep retreating with the rest. But she came back to where the Vertexes were, mustering all of her bravery.

"Suzume, you're just in time!"

Mebuki had Suzume take support of Yumiko.

"Suzume, SHIZUKU, take Miroku-san with you".

"Eh?"

"Oi, Kusunoki. What are you planning to do?"

"You two, just focus on taking Miroku-san to safety as fast as you can! Her injuries are grave".

"I asked what you were planning to do, damn it!"

"I'm going to carve open a path of retreat. I'll protect everyone. So I'm leaving her to you two!"

Mebuki took her own rifle in the right hand, and Yumiko's rifle in the left.

Dual wielding.

Back then, Mebuki practiced the dual wielding style along with Miyoshi Karin. And her scores were also at the top. The way of fighting with two weapons in one hand was carved into her mind.

"The agglomeration of the gods, Shinju... The messengers of the gods, the Vertexes... The world changed by the gods, the world protected by the gods... I've had enough already".

Mebuki readied the two rifles.

"What makes you damn gods think you can hurt people? What makes you think you can kill us!?"

Leaping from the blazing ground, Mebuki flew towards Pisces. What moved Mebuki was anger. At the gods that stole away the humans' world. At the Vertexes that kept attempting to kill them. At herself, who was unable to protect her friends from getting hurt. At the Taisha, who were willing to sacrifice other people to beg the gods for forgiveness. At the wretched world where a girl heading towards her death smiled and said she was happy to be a sacrifice.

Her anger was directed at many things.

Brandishing the two rifles, Mebuki cut off one of Pisces' fins. Through her combat experience, she understood that the Vertexes were not impervious to

attacks. Grotesque as they might have been, they still had weak spots. If struck there, they would receive damage even from the Sentinels' weaker weapons.

"Don't underestimate mankind! Don't get in our way, you damn messengers of the gods!"

Having cut its fin off, she thrust the bayonets into the eye-like organs on its head. And then unleashed a barrage so intense it felt like her shoulders would dislocate. Having been pumped of bullets inside, Pisces had its movements grow dull. It must have been regenerating from the amount of damage it took.

That created gap let SHIZUKU, carrying Yumiko and Suzume, her shield at the ready slip by Pisces and run towards the wall.

"Uuuuuuuh, it's scary, it's scary, we're gonna die!"

Suzume ran, tears streaming down her face. The Vertexes behind were terrifying. They might have appeared in their previous missons, but this time there were three of them. The danger was incomparable.

I'll get killed. This time, I'll definitely die. Suzume couldn't stop those thoughts and kept crying. I' SHIZUKU, who was carrying Yumiko, was annoyed.

"If you're that scared, why'd you even come back? Should've ran away with the rest of the squad-"

"Of course I can't do that! I'd hate it if Mebu died! I don't want Miroku-san or you to die either, SHIZUKU-sama! So I have to protect you even if it's scary, waaaaah!"

"I said stop crying... Cut it out with the "-sama", seriously".

One of Virgo's bombs headed towards the two. Suzume blocked it with her shield.

"Mebu has always protected me! The weak me, always! But I can't do anything for Mebu! So I will at least help her reach her goal! Not let anyone die! Zero casualties! I won't let anyone die!"

In reality, it's not as if Mebuki constantly protected Suzume. In fact, the amount of times Suzume was the one to save Mebuki wasn't small. But in her mind, Suzume was always the one being protected by Mebuki. As long as

Mebuki was there, Suzume could live. She felt that she was alive thanks to Mebuki. But Suzume couldn't do anything for her in return. She was worthless. Mebuki could do anything. Suzume was weak, Mebuki was strong. So Suzume always took something from Mebuki. Always received. And never paid her back.

And so, at least now Suzume had to be of use. She had to protect Mebuki's ideal of zero casualties.

"I thought this kind of chance would never come... For me to be useful to Mebu! So I have to do my best!"

Even if it was scary, she would do it.

She was scared enough to wet herself, but she would still do it.

Suzume blocked an approaching Virgo bomb with her shield. And then, no more attacks came...

Mebuki stopped almost all of them.

When Capricorn started moving again, she would cut off one of its appendages with the rifle in her right hand again. When Virgo started shooting, she would shoot the bombs down with the rifle in her left. While firing at them, she would leap towards Pisces. She sliced off the fins that have finished regenerating.

When a group of Stardust assaulted the retreating three, she would gun them down with both of her rifles.

The equipment of the Sentinels couldn't destroy the Vertexes. But it was still capable of destroying Stardust, intercepting the bombs and whittling the Vertexes down and dull their movements. That way, she was able to prevent any harm from befalling the three.

(It was all For this)

During elementary school...

With admiration for her father, she continued trying her best. And thus, was called out to be a Hero candidate.

During her time as a Hero candidate...

She put all of her mind into training in dual wielding. And thus, was able to fight with the two rifles as dexterously as now.

She built up her strength through rigorous exercise. And thus, was able to stand up to the Vertexes with fierce movements now.

She trained her grip strength. And thus, would not release her rifles even when striking at the Vertexes' hard exterior now.

She sharpened her reflexes. And thus, was able to react immediately to the attacks of the enemy now.

She trained her concentration. And thus, was able to combat three enemies at once now.

And after she became a Sentinel...

She trained herself in sharpshooting. And thus was able to shoot down the Stardust and Virgo's bombs now.

She trained herself in use of the bayonet. And thus, had the skills to carve up even these strong enemies now.

She became the commander of the squad and had to direct her gaze at the people surrounding her. And thus, made comrades who she had to protect now.

(It was all for this moment... Nothing I've done was in vain!.. Not a single thing was pointless!) Even the days Mebuki spent as a Hero candidate that she deemed pointless. The days she treated the Sentinels as a stepping stone for becoming a Hero, too.

All of the life she lived until now has been building up to this moment. Everything was connected to "now", when Mebuki had comrades to protect and the ability to do so.

The Mebuki of the past passed the baton to the Mebuki of the present.

Mebuki continued her fight to protect her retreating comrades, not letting a single one of those three Vertexes past.

But even she had her limits. There was no way for her to continue this absurd battle forever.

The moment there was a lapse in her concentration from the fatigue, Pisces rammed her from beneath the surface and sent her flying. At the same time, Virgo launched bombs at her.

She can't avoid them.

Mebuki resolved for death.

The Sentinels were weak. Weak enough for a momentary mistake to lead to one's death after a struggle on equal terms.

That's why...

"Gunner squad, take aim! Fire!"

That was not Mebuki's voice. It was the voice of another officer-type, the girl bearing the number of two. The Sentinels that were supposed to have left towards the wall returned for some reason.

The girls standing in formation shot down every single bomb heading towards Mebuki.

The injured Yumiko and SHIZUKU, who was supporting her, were being protected by Suzume and the rest of the protector squad.

"Kusunoki-san, please don't die on your own!"

"Don't we have to do it with zero casualties!?"

"Get on your feet! We'll cover for you!"

That's why...

That's why they fought in a group. They joined their forces as one, and fought together.

Thanks to Mebuki's fight that almost made one think she was possessed by a demon and the efforts of the rest of the girls, all thirty two of them survived agains the three Vertexes. All of them returned back. They retrieved the seed and fulfilled their mission.

But Yumiko's injuries were grave.

She was immediately taken away to a Taisha-governed hospital and underwent urgent surgery "The doctors did all they can, but it's still not certain

whether or not she will survive".

So they were told by the hospital staff.

Yumiko was sleeping in an ICU room, connected to various machinery.

Mebuki sat, staring at the bed where Yumiko slept from outside the glass. The rest of the Sentinels were all wounded to an extent, and so they were all resting after undergoing medical care.

Mebuki sat alone, waiting for Yumiko to wake up.

"Kusunoki-san, you are quite injured as well. You should get treated and get some rest too".

Said the priestess.

But Mebuki shook her head.

"I will remain here. Until Miroku-san opens her eyes".

"Right now, there is nothing you can do. All we can do now is to pray to Shinju-sama. And that can be done from atop your bed".

The priestess was right. Mebuki wasn't a doctor. She accomplished nothing by this.

And Mebuki would not pray. Yumiko's wounds were inflicted by the gods. How could she pray to them?

"I can't do anything. I won't praty to the gods. All I can do... Is to stay by her side and keep calling out for her in my heart. I know there is no point in it, but still..."

"...If that's what you want to do, it's fine".

The priestess' voice was expressionless as always.

"I thought I was a more rational person".

"What are you saying?"

In that moment, something resembling emotion has unexpectedly appeared in the priestess' voice. It felt like a mixture of sarcasm and a wry smile.

"You aren't a rational person at all. Stoic to the point of obstinancy and

strong-willed. Those are not the qualities of a rational person. They're those of an idealist".

The priestess turned away and left.

Mebuki continued gazing at the sleeping Yumiko and calling out to her.

(Please open your eyes, Miroku-san. You're supposed to restore the Miroku family to its former glory, aren't you? You don't have the leisure to be sleeping like this. I'm not going to carry your dream in your stead...)

That day, Mebuki had not a wink of sleep and kept watching over Yumiko. Yumiko didn't open her eyes.

The next day, after finishing their medical treatments, Suzume, Shizuku and the rest of the Sentinels came to the ICU. And just like Mebuki, they simply stood in silence, watching over Yumiko.

Second day. Yumiko still hasn't woken up. Unease and worry started growing amongst the Sentinels. Mebuki hasn't slept for almost 60 hours, still waiting for Yumiko to return.

Third day. The sun started sinking. The late autumn skies began to be dyed in red.

And Miroku Yumiko opened her eyes. Doctors and nurses started streaming into the ICU, ascertaining Yumiko's condition. After that, the girls were allowed into the room.

Yumiko was still out of it, but when she saw Mebuki enter, the glimmer of life returned to her eyes.

"Oh my... If it is anyone but my rival, Mebuki-san. My apologies for having you worried. But it appears that my time to be taken away has not yet co-\*cough, cough\*"

Yumiko held her stomach with tears in her eyes.

"Miroku-san, are you stupid? You just regained consciousness, you wounds haven't healed. Of course this is going to happen if you force yourelf to talk".

She was talking to Yumiko just like always. But something was different from the usual... Drops of water were falling down Mebuki's cheeks, dropping on Yumiko's bed.

"Huh... why?.. Am I... crying?.."

Bewildered, Mebuki continued shedding tears.

"It's because you devoted yourself, mind and body, to your comrades".

The priestess entered the ICU.

"The time you spent with the Sentinels. The bonds all of you built up. Because you met them with all of your being, the girls became an irreplaceable being to you. Your friends. Right now, you're shedding tears for your friends".

"...Friends..."

The concept Mebuki discarded as useless when she began to aim for be a Hero.

It took an awfully long time. It has been such a roundabout path. But Mebuki has finally obtained them.

And then, a reserved voice was heard from outside the room.

"Mebuki-senpai".

The voice belonged to none other but Kokudo Aya.

The girl that was taken away to be a sacrifice stood there. She was making a somewhat embarassed smile.

"...I'm "...I'm back".

It occured roughly half a day before Aya returned to Daisoku. The Taisha priests visited the residence of a certain girl in Sanshuu. With beautiful jet-black hair, well-groomed looks and ample femininity... She was still in her early teens, but she carried a mature look. It was not only her looks - her expression was equally as mature. Perhaps it was due to the heaviness of the experiences life has given her.

The priests paid that girl exorbitant amounts of respect. As if even looking her in the face was insolence, they were prostrated on the floor. But in contrast to the respect they were outwardly showing, their words were cruel. The girl's very life was on the line.

"The Taisha has selected the Mikos to be sacrificed several days ago. In the same way the Fire Offering Festival was conducted in the Christian Era, we will offer six of them to the heavenly gods. The preparations are already underway".

"So if that happens, six people will be sacrificed..."

"..."

"But if I am sacrificed, that alone will be enough..."

So whispered the girl.

The priests lay prostrate without saying a word. Either to not be disrespectful or to not say anything unneeded. But it was certain that their silence carried a meaning. In a way, it signified that they would proceed with the ceremony regardless of the answer.

They didn't come to the girl with such cruel words for nothing. In fact, this was something the girl expected.

In the past, they haven't told her and those near her anything, which lead to a tragedy. And so the Taisha decided to tell them as much as they possibly can.

The girl picked up on the priests' intentions and answered. She told them that she would sacrifice herself.

"I ask that you release the Mikos selected from their duty. I will be the sacrifice. When I broke the wall, I said that it would be fine if I was the only one. Yes... If it's me alone..."

While Aya was surrounded by the rest of the Sentinels, Mebuki was talking with the priestess on the rooftop of the hospital.

"Kokudo-san has been released from her duty"

So said the masked preiestess.

"So that means the Fire Offering Festival... Has been cancelled?"

"No. But one of the Heroes volunteered herself to take the place of those Mikos".

"You don't mean... Miyoshi-san?"

"It isn't her".

For the slightest moment, hesitation could be heard in her voice.

"The sacrifice will be Tougou Mimori. She expressed her desire to take responsibility for having broken the wall..."

"...Aya-chan wasn't sacrificed... But somebody still will?"

The priestess nodded.

Mebuki clenched her fist in frustration. If anyone was to become a sacrifice at all, it would not be the outcome Mebuki desired.

"Your duties as the Sentinels are finished for now. There is a possibility of another mission arising in the future, but surveys of the outside world and Kunizukuri are over".

11 11

"The Taisha expected numerous casualties in the line of the Sentinel duty...
But even though there were many injured, not a single one died. You did well.
And you've changed a lot since back then. If you were to compete with Miyoshisan now, I'm certain we could not possibly decide who would inherit Gin's terminal".

"Gin? The previous generation Hero?"

"That's right... She retired from her duty... No, was killed by the Vertexes. If you received her terminal now, I'm sure she wouldn't be angry".

Those words sounded strange for a simple relationship between a Hero and a priest. The priests usually showed respect and formality with the Heroes, who carried the most important of duties. But her voice was almost if she knew her for a long time...

"Did you know Minowa Gin personally?"

"I wouldn't say personally. I was looking after the Heroes of the previous generation.... Not just in their duties, but as their regular school teacher. That is all".

Her relationship with those Heroes must've been similar to the one between Aya and the Sentinels.

In that case, what must she have felt when Minowa Gin lost her life? But one could only guess the emotions behind that mask.

"Kusunoki-san. Right now, you could very well fulfill the duties of a Hero. I will inform the Taisha of that as well. If additional Heroes are ever needed, you will take on that role".

"There's no need. I'm not going to become a Hero".

Mebuki's answer left the priestess speechless.

"But were you not strongly obsessed with becoming one?"

"That's right. And I'm still aiming to become one. But your Taisha understanding of it is far from mine. A Hero being someone who lives on the condition of sacrifice... I won't accept that".

" "

The priestess went silent for a while and then asked Mebuki a question.

"You said that you wouldn't let a single Sentinel be a casualty, and that it's your vow as Kusunoki Mebuki - a single human. And you stayed true to your words. But the history of mankind is one built on sacrifices. Science, culture, and the very human life itself stands on countless corpses.

"I understand. That's absolutely true".

Their current Shikoku itself stood on top of the sacrifices made by the Heroes of the past, the Mikos and countless other, unrecorded people.

"If you understand that, why do you reject sacrifices so strongly? If a lot can be saved by sacrificing a few, is that truly something bad?"

"You... No, the Taisha, only view the humanity as a single whole. You view everything from away, as if pieces on a go or a shogi board. That's why you don't understand".

Mebuki glared at the priestess.

"But in that great whole, every single person has a family, friends, people they love. Even a single sacrificed person will make the people who loved them feel like the world has ended! From your elevated viewpoint, you're not noticing

something so simple! Something a middle schooler like me can understand! There's nothing good about the choice of saving many by killing a few!"

At first, Mebuki's resolve to not a single casualty occur was a way of proving her strength to the Taisha. Then, it was her display of antagonism to the unjust gods.

But now everything was different.

The anger and sorrow she felt when they were informed of Aya's impending sacrifice.

The joy and relief she felt when Yumiko escaped death's grasp.

Every single of the Sentinels and Mikos whose names would not even remain in the records was one human in the great humanity - a precious, irreplaceable life.

And none had the right to sacrifice it. Not a single life. Mebuki shouted, her very anger manifesting into words.

"Claw and struggle for your life until the very end! People who don't know what it is to struggle to the death don't have the right to calmly decide whose lives are to be sacrificed!"

The priestess listened to Mebuki silently, without saying a word.

"The title of the "Hero" you Taisha give out is worthless! I will strive to be a hero according to my ideals, and I will become one!"

"...And what is the ideal hero you have in mind?"

"Someone who won't allow a single sacrifice to happen. Someone who will open a path where no sacrifices have to be made. That is a true hero".

"..."

"I will continue my duties as a Sentinel. I will continue searching for a way different from the Taisha's, that takes sacrifices as a given. If possibility arises, I will enter Taisha itself, and change your rotten ways from the inside. And I'll find a way that requires no sacrifices, no matter what it takes".

Mebuki thought...

If she could do that, then she would finally accept herself as a hero, too.

There was no inherent value in the name and status of a "Hero" ordained by the Taisha. Being recognised as one by your comrades and yourself was infinitely more important.

Right now, Mebuki had comrades who would recognise her as a hero. All that's left was for Mebuki to recognise herself as one, too. And for that, she would aim towards her ideal vision of a hero: "Someone who will open a path where no sacrifices have to be made".

"A path where no sacrifices have to be made... If it's you, perhaps you'll be able to accomplish that someday".

"Not perhaps. I will. Absolutely".

Saying that, Mebuki turned around and left the rooftop.

What moved Kusunoki Mebuki was anger.

At the Taisha, so quick to choose ways that take sacrifices as a given.

At the gods, who forced sacrifices upon mankind.

At the humans, who accepted the need for sacrifices with an "It can't be helped".

It was anger at the entire unjust world.

And one more thing moved her...

Mebuki returned to the ICU room. The Sentinel girls were overjoyed at Yumiko's recovery and Aya's return.

Kagajou Suzume. Miroku Yumiko. Yamabushi Shizuku. Yamabushi SHIZUKU. Kokudo Aya. All of the Sentinels. Each and every single one of them was a precious friend.

And she wouldn't ever let anyone of them die.

She wouldn't let the Heroes die either.

She would let absolutely nobody die.

So she vowed.

The seasons changed to winter.

Today, again, the Sentinels, led by Kusunoki Mebuki, stood atop the wall in their battle suits.

"It really is the middle of winter... The air is cold. And that's despite the scorching hellscape outside of the barrier... Well, not that the seasons change our duty in any way".

Starting with Mebuki, the girls donned their combat suits again.

"Well, everyone, let's start our mission! As always, we're achieving our goal without a single casualty!"

The Sentinels responded in unison.

And so, with Mebuki at their lead, the girls once again trod on the scorching wasteland...

(End)

## **Epilogue**

Fallen petals won't return to the branch, a broken mirror won't shine again The girls chosen by Shinju - the agglomeration of land gods - and fighting using divine powers. Their enemies - the Vertexes, the advance force of the heavenly god trying to destroy humanity.

Divine Era 300, April. A new Vertex invasion after approximately 1.5 years since the last. The Heroes of project A awaken. The "Sealing ritual" added to the updated Hero system proves its usefulness. "Virgo" Vertex is destroyed.

Divine Era 300, June. Another Vertex invasion. Project B Hero "Miyoshi Karin" meets up with the project A Heroes. Successful activation of the "Sealing ritual" by Miyoshi Karin alone.

Divine Era 300, July. Vertex invasion deviates from estimated schedule, five Vertexes appear simultaneously. In addition, incomplete Vertex types are spotted. Activation of "Mankai" by the Heroes is confirmed. Elimination of all invading Vertexes confirmed.

Divine era 300, September. Heroes "Inubouzaki Fuu", "Tougou Mimori" go berserk. Divine Era 300, December. Fire Offering Festival is conducted, with Hero "Tougou Mimori" as the offering. Due to opposition from Hero "Yuuki Yuuna" and four others, Fire Offering Festival suspended.

From the viewpoint of humanity, the conflict of humans, land gods and the heavenly god was always centered on the Heroes. However, in their shadow, there was another entity...

Girls who used divine powers in their operations. Their name was "Sentinels". Rather than combat with the Vertexes, their duty was to assist the Taisha in their countermeasures against the heavenly god. Bluntly put, their duty was to set the stage up for the Heroes, mere odd jobs.

Divine Era 301, late winter. Kagawa prefecture, Daisoku city, Gold Tower. The

thirty two Sentinels were doing their daily training. The training regimen consisted of: lower body half strengthening, building stamina and mock battles with the assumption of a fight against Stardust. The Sentinels' duties mainly consisted of surveying the outside of the wall surrounding Shikoku. The most important part of their training was to nurture strength necessary for movement across the inflamed wasteland for a long period of time, as well as the combat strength to oppose the Stardust standing in their way.

"After the running, we're going to have a mock battle using the new formation we talked about yesterday".

Hearing the words of Kusunoki Mebuki, the Sentinel commander, Kagajou Suzume raised a shriek of complaint.

"Eeh!? Mebu, we're still gonna keep going!? Let's call it a day already, I'm going to die from overwork if this goes on! Haaah, haaah, haaah! Hear that? Hear that!? I'm beginning to hyperventilate from fatigue! This is dangerous!"

Suzume dropped down on the floor, breathing heavily on purpose.

"Su-zu-me... You're getting double the training."

"Roger that, ma'am! Mock battle next, got it!"

Suzume hurriedly stood up and got in position.

"Mebuki-senpai, everyone. Maybe you should finish your training for today. The mess hall has dinner ready".

Kokudo Aya, the Miko living together with the Sentinels in the Gold Tower, entered the training grounds. Suzume's eyes lit up at her sight.

"Ayaya! Thank you! You're my saviour! A goddess! An angel! See, see!? Even Ayaya's saying so, so let's call it a day for now!"

"Fine..."

With a tired look, Mebuki ordered the Sentinels to finish their training.

In the mess hall, Suzume lay flat on the table in front of her dinner.

"Anyway, aren't our duties basically over at this point? Sure, we get called out to check what's going on outside the wall sometimes... But it's not like they

have us go far away like before, and we don't have a quota on soil samples or anything."

"We're taking our time training exactly because we don't have many missions now. Come on, I'll give you a mandarin, so get it together".

Mebuki peeled a mandarin and put a piece of it in Suzume's mouth.

"Ahh, I can feel the vitamins spreading through my body. Mebu, I want more~!"

"Alright, alright..."

Mebuki kept feeding Suzume mandarin pieces.

At the end of the previous year, a Fire Offering Ceremony involving six Mikos, Aya included, was supposed to occur, but Tougou Mimori volunteered to be sacrificed in their place. Following that, Tougou Mimori was rescued by the other Heroes, and the Fire Offering Ceremony was prevented. Mebuki was relieved. Kusunoki Mebuki's creed was to have no sacrifices. She didn't know who Tougou Mimori was, but regardless, she was not to become a sacrifice. However, Mebuki and the others were powerless to stop the Fire Offering Ceremony.

She didn't know how, but the Heroes were able to do that. And after the ceremony was stopped, Shikoku regained stability for a while.

After the Fire Offering Ceremony incident, the amount of missions the Sentinels were tasked with declined sharply. The Sentinels' main duty was to assist with the Taisha's countermeasures against the heavenly god. However, the plans of the Taisha were essentially suspsended. Looking for a different solution, the Taisha wasn't giving the Sentinels any orders.

However, they did inform the Sentinels that they would eventually be promoted to Heroes. In other words, their duty was not to cease, and the Taisha must've been looking for some other way to use them. And since they were enticing them with such sweet words as "becoming Heroes", that duty was likely to be important.

"Oh how I wish an order would come down to us soon. Then I would at last be able to earn more feats of honour than Mebuki-san and make the Miroku name

known throughout Shikoku" - said Miroku Yumiko while eating skipjack tuna and drinking black tea - a dubious food combination to say the least.

"Miroku... You probably still can't..." - said Yamabushi Shizuku, slurping on ramen.

"What do you mean, "still"!? What do you mean, "can't"!?"

"Miroku-senpai, you're going to be fine! Hard work like yours will definitely be rewarded! But it's better if you don't have to do anything dangerous or fight..."

Aya's expression darkened.

The thirty two Sentinels plus one Miko all lived in the Gold Tower. They numbered enough people for an average school class. Mebuki, Suzume, Yumiko, Shizuku and Aya often hanged out together.

"Oh yeah... Kusunoki, here."

Shizuku gave two bags, wrapped in gold and silver, to Mebuki.

"What's this?"

"Open it."

Upon opening the bags, Mebuki found chocolate in both of them. In one of them was a lumpy chocolate truffle, seemingly handmade. The other had a bar of chocolate, as-is.

"It's... Valentine's today, so. From me and SHIZUKU."

"Aah... I see, then."

Since Mebuki had little interest in social customs, she completely forgot about it. In addition, nobody talked about vain things like Valentine's Day in front of Mebuki, who projected a tough and aloof image.

"Ah, I have something for you too! Give me a minute, Mebu!"

Suzume stood up, dashed out of the mess hall and returned after a short while. She was carrying a lot of bags in her hands.

"Here, a popular Ehime souvenir: chocolate mandarins! They're mandarins cut in circles, dried and coated in chocolate. They're su-per tasty!"

"Thanks... But there must be what, two dozen bags here? I can't eat that much..."

"Then share what you can't eat with the others! I even get to spread the word about Ehime mandarins like that, two birds with one stone!"

"Mebuki-senpai, I have something ready too."

Aya gave Mebuki a wrapped bag. Inside was a handmade chocolate cake.

The other girls in the mess hall began approaching Mebuki with chocolates and sweets in their hands.

"Kusunoki-san, me too, me too!"

"Commander, please take this!"

"Ya're crazy popular, commander. Here, I have some too!"

"Here's from me... J-Just an obligation one, okay?"

"My deepest gratitude for all you've done for us!"

A mountain of chocolate piled up in front of Mebuki.

"Ah, uh... Thanks, everyone." - said Mebuki with bewilderment.

Among the rest of the girls, one stood out...

Miroku Yumiko was fidgeting and trembling.

"I... I forgot. N-Not that I had any deep feelings of gratitude, merely of friendship, but not giving anything while everyone else is doing so makes me feel like I'm losing... Alfred! Alfred! Bring me the finest chocolate in Shikoku, and be quick with it!"

"No, there's no Alfred. Your imaginary butler can't bring you real chocolate."

"Alfred exists, Suzume-san! In... in the future Miroku family, for certain!"

"So he doesn't exist now..."

"Just you wait, Mebuki-san! I shall purchase baker's chocolate and begin cooking immediately!"

Yumiko stood up from her chair, but Mebuki grabbed her by the hand and stopped her.

"Miroku-san, please wait. It's already dark outside, and nobody's going to give you a permission to leave at this time of the day to buy sweets."

"B-But..."

Yumiko wasn't convinced, and Aya began patting her head.

"Please don't worry. I'm sure Mebuki-senpai would accept it to tomorrow too. So you can just make it then. Right, Mebuki-senpai?"

"Tomorrow or any other time, it's not like I would decline it..."

Why were they making such a big deal out of Valentine's chocolate in the first place? She wouldn't care much if she didn't get any.

"Uh... Aya-san? Having my head patted like this is... A little embarrassing..."

"Ah, I'm sorry, Miroku-senpai! I didn't mean to!"

Aya took her hand of Yumiko's head in surprise.

"No, well, I do not mind. In fact, could you do this a little longer?.."

"Really? Okay then..."

Aya kept patting Yumiko on the head.

After that, the Sentinels who saw that happen would occasionally request Aya to give them headpats. But that's a story for a different time.

"You know, Mebu, you're going to have a real busy time on White Day with so many chocolates received."

"You're right. But I'll have to pay everyone back."

She simply had to return the gratitude to the friends who followed her. It's been nearly half a year since the Sentinels and Aya, the Miko, began living together in the Tower. They overcame many dangers together, and understood each other. The Sentinels trusted each other enough to talk about personal issues and worries.

For the Sentinels, the Gold Tower became their "home".

However, sometimes Taisha personnel would come to this house of theirs and do something in the basement floors. The Sentinels were forbidden from

entering that area, so they had no idea what exactly was taking place.

Several days later, a mission was suddenly announced.

A group of Taisha priests arrived at the Tower, and the Sentinels were, as usually, gathered at the viewing platform. However, Aki, who was formerly in charge of the Sentinels, was not amongst them. They didn't know where she was and what she was doing. Mebuki might've found her irritating in many ways, but Aki also had to live through all of the pain brought by her position. Was that not in the way, perhaps she and Mebuki could've understood each other better.

One of the priests began talking in front of the Sentinels. His speech was fast, and a sense of hurry could be clearly felt from his tone.

"I'm sure all of you have already heard that the Gold Tower is called Senkeiden in the Taisha, and is a spiritual defensive structure, much like the Great Bridge."

After Aki told her that at the end of the previous year, Mebuki let the others know as well. The Senkeiden was not yet complete. The Taisha personnel working in the Tower might've been to finish the project.

"The Senkeiden's attack is meant to be a two-stage one. The first one involves it collecting the spiritual energy from its surroundings and then releasing it at airborne enemies, its name being Senkeihou [Chikage cannon]. The antennalike equipment on the roof is responsible for that. As a second volley, the Senkeiden itself would be launched at the enemy and destroy the target... However, at this stage, only the Senkeihou is finished. But we have no time left, so it has to be used now."

The priest's words caused a sense of tension wildly different from the one the announcements their routine survey missions brought to spread through the platform.

```
"Used... Against what?"
```

<sup>&</sup>quot;The enemy coming from the heavens."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What!?"

All of the Sentinels froze in their places.

The enemy manking has been fighting against since the end of the Christian Era - the heavenly god. Up to then, the Heroes fought their advance force - the Vertexes. However, this time the actual being was about to manifest itself.

Aki mentioned the possibility of that happening the year before. The time has finally come.

"Tomorrow, the heavenly god will show itself."

The priest droned on.

"Did a Miko oracle tell of that? Why so suddenly?"

The priest paid Mebuki's question no heed and continued.

"The Senkeihou alone is unlikely to cause the heavenly god significant damage. However, all it has to do is slow its advance to a degree. And after that, there's no other choice but to leave it to the Heroes."

The following morning, the preparations to fire the Senkeihou began. A certain amount of time was needed to accumulate enough energy from the land, so the activation time was on a countdown till the appearance of the heavenly god.

Aya, as a Miko, was standing by in a room in the Tower's basement. Aya's body was supposed to be the circuit guiding the energy of the land to the Tower. After enough power was accumulated, Aya and Mebuki had to simultaneously press their respective switches to activate the weapon.

Approximately ten minutes before the Senkeihou was fully charged...

The Tower began shaking.

No, what began shaking was the land itself.

"A-An earthquake!? Mebu, save me! The Tower's going to break!"

"Suzume, calm down! The Tower won't break from shaking like that! More importantly, look!"

The Sentinels, standing by at the viewing platform, began murmuring as they looked outside. The sky became dyed dark red, and from the sea... from outside

the wall, a disk large enough to cover the sea appeared. That was the heavenly god.

"There are... Stardust." Muttered Shizuku, pointing at the direction of what they presumed to be the heavenly god.

Normally, Stardust weren't supposed to be able to get inside the barrier. Yet here they were, plainly visible. Did they break in along with the heavenly god, or were they being produced by it?

The Stardust horde was headed towards the Tower.

A priest began addressing the girls at the platform through the speakers.

"The enemy's appearance was sooner than we estimated! Since the Senkeiden is closer to the heavens than any other place, it's going to get targeted first! You Sentinels have to protect the Tower until the Senkeihou can fire!"

"The least you could have done is estimate the invasion time properly!"

Yumiko cursed in a voice that couldn't be further from her usual polite intonations.

"Those priests saying it's unexpected is something we expected in the first place! Everyone, get in positions we talked about yesterday!"

A "roger" roared out in response to Mebuki's command, and the Sentinels went rushing to their assigned positions.

Mebuki pressed another switch in her hand, different from the one that would activate the Senkeihou.

"Senkeiden, changing into defensive mode! Deploying Senkeibashi [Chikage bridge]!"

Five rods extended from the surface of the 144-metre tall Gold Tower, and each of them began opening up in a fan shape, turning into scaffolding.

On each of the five scaffolding pieces - the Senkeibashi - was a four-person group made up of one officer, two gunners and one protector. In addition, there was also a group at the rooftop, at the viewing platform and the ground floor.

Eight groups of four people, adding up to thirty two. They would defend their assigned positions to their last breath.

Mebuki, Yumiko, Shizuku and Suzume were at the rooftop. With Mebuki, Sentinel number one as their core, they were the first squad. Since the rooftop contained the equipment responsible for the Senkeihou, it was the most important place to defend, hence Mebuki, their strongest asset, being assigned there.

That, of course, didn't make the other locations any less important. If the ground floor group fell, the Stardust would break into the basement and attack Aya, killing her. If the groups on the scaffolding or the viewing platform group fell, then the Stardust would likely tear through the Tower itself, breaking it down.

Each and every one of the thirty two Sentinels and one Miko was crucial. The Taisha viewed the girls as little more than "a group". But every single one of those girls had an important duty to fulfill, and a battle to fight.

Mebuki could contact the other Sentinels through the communicator built into their battle dress. She began her speech to her comrades.

"The big boss of the Stardust and Vertexes who have been tormenting humanity for 300 years, the heavenly god has appeared today. And now that it's here, this must be the final battle. We can't defeat it. We're not Heroes. We don't have the power to take down gods. All we, along with the Senkeiden, can do is wound it a little. The people and the Heroes probably don't even know we're fighting. There's nobody who'll sing us praises for it... So what! Even if nobody knows about it, we're here! The thirty three of us are fighting here! The holiness of this battle, our efforts, our resolve, our lives, our feelings, the fact we're even here - even if nobody else knows about that, we do! Even if the damage we deal to the heavenly god is barely noticeable, no more than a single punch, it's definitely going to help the Heroes who will follow up on it! And we're the only ones who can do that! Nobody else in the world can! We'll put our lives on the line and the Heroes will feel that!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Roger!" - thirty two voices of Mebuki's friends responded in unison.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Everyone, ready for battle! We're protecting the Tower until the Senkeihou

is ready to fire! We're fulfilling our mission with nobody dying and no casualties, like always!"

"Roger!"

The Stardust horde reached the Gold Tower.

"Mebu! It's too high, I'm scared! Sorry if I end up wetting myself, Mebuuu!"

Suzume was shaking like a leaf. Mebuki's group was standing on the rooftop of a 144-metre tall tower.

Even though Suzume wasn't usually scared of being inside the Gold Tower, she was still an extreme coward, afraid of both the height and the dark.

"Suzume. If you fall, I promise I will pull you up. So calm down and fight."

"Uuh... Got it. I'll do my best, Mebuuu!"

Suzume readied her shield.

"Miroku-san, SHIZUKU! Guns at the ready!"

"Leave it to me!"

"We're doing this!"

Mebuki, Yumiko and SHIZUKU aimed their rifles and shot through the Stardust. The adverse effect of splitting the Sentinels into eight groups was the small number of shots fired, but each of those shots became more precise over the half a year they spent training and fighting. Each and every shot landed accurately at the Stardust, eliminating them. The ones who got through the bullets were cut down by the bayonets.

The heavenly god... Countless people died because of it in the Christian Era. Countless casualties were its fault. At least a punch. They had to give it at least a single punch in return for toying with human lives. So they couldn't let the enemy come near the firing antenna.

The Sentinels on the five Senkeibashi footholds fought the same way. The officer, gunners and the protector all gave it their all.

Although the majority of the Stardust was concentrated on the Tower itself, some would head down to where the ground floor group was. And those, of

course, could not be ignored either. Even a single Stardust was a massive menace to humans. So the Sentinels shot them all down without fail.

"You know, aren't we protecting humanity right now? Kinda like Heroes!"

"Yeah, you're right! Awesome..."

The Sentinels' duties up to now were just exploration of the outside world and related tasks. They didn't protect the world or the people like the muchadmired Heroes. Even though they were risking their lives, there wasn't any sense of accomplishment or duty that would accompany protecting the world.

Up to that moment.

The Sentinels were fighting to protect the people. To protect the world. Just like Heroes.

The viewing platform group was engaged in battle with Stardust that managed to tear their way through the window. The fifth group was in charge of it. Sentinel number five, the youngest of the officers, and three other Sentinels under her command.

"The Tower... We won't let any Stardust destroy our Senkeiden! Girls, let's put out guts into this! We'll protect it!"

"Yeah!"

This tower was a place where the girls have been living with their friends for half a year after having been called to it by the Taisha. Some of the girls were sick of the harsh traiing. Some of them cried, afraid of their missions. But they got through all the pain and fear together. For the thirty three girls, the Gold Tower was something irreplaceable.

For them, the Tower itself was a comrade fighting together with them. It was something precious to them, even omitting the fact it possessed a weapon capable of striking back at the heavenly god. So they wouldn't let some Stardust destroy it.

The ground floor group protecting the entry to the basement was the final defence line. If the enemy broke through them, then they would kill Kokudo Aya down below.

The Stardust that fell on the ground near the Tower would head inside and rush to the basement entry. But they would find Sentinels standing in their way. Tasked with the ground floor was the second group - Sentinel number two and her three subordinates. Out of the eight groups protecting the Tower, this group was second only to Mebuki's in terms of combat strength.

"We're not letting those monsters get to Kokudo-san! Protect her with your lives! Let's show them the human spirit!"

"Roger!"

The Sentinels' gunshots, bayonets and shield blocked the way underground.

Aya was the Sentinels' moral support. Those who dropped out of the Hero training facility, those who weren't selected bby the Shinju - in other words, they were leftovers. But Aya kindly watched over them. She was their salvation.

So they would protect her no matter what. They wouldn't let her die.

Mebuki was in the middle of a fight against the Stardust when a bizarre mark appeared on her chest.

"...Huh? What is this..."

The heavenly god, encroaching from over the sea, began pulsating with an eerie red light.

The same mark appeared on Yumiko, SHIZUKU and Suzume's chests.

"What exactly is this?"

"Uwaaah, this is bad! I have no idea what this is but it's totally gotta be bad! This is bad this is bad I'm gonna die!"

"Is this shit the heavenly god's doing? That's so annoying!"

If this ominous-looking mark really was its doing, then it was undoubtedly something dangerous.

Worried voices began to be heard through the communicator. It seemed that the marks appeared on everyone in the Tower.

"Three minutes left until the Senkeihou is charged! Hold the line!"

Mebuki yelled to every Sentinel defending the Tower and glared at the

heavenly god.

Some god it was. Sitting up in its heavens since times immemorial, looking down from above all self-important, and toying with human lives like they were nothing but garbage. Why was something so full of itself even allowed to exist? And she was going to beat that anger into the heavenly god.

Two minutes until the charging is finished.

Mebuki looked over the land of Shikoku from the rooftop. People stood still at the roads, staring at the red sky with bewilderment. The Heroes must've been somewhere out there too. Miyoshi Karin with them.

In the past, Mebuki would've probably lamented not being a Hero, not having the power to fight against the heavenly god. But she was different now.

(I need to do what I have to do! What I can do! I'll give it the first punch, and Miyoshi-san and the other Heroes will finish it!) She would pass the baton.

One minute until the charging is finished.

The Stardust weren't getting any less numerous. For every one taken down, another would attack. Mebuki was thinking of the comrades fighting together with her. She was thinking of Aya, hard at work in the basement. She was thinking of the Heroes, who must've been somewhere.

Charging complete.

"Mebuki-senpai, it's ready to fire!"

Aya's voice came through the communicator to Mebuki.

"Aya-chan, we're pressing it together."

"Got it! Together!"

"Three, two, one... zero!"

Mebuki pressed the switch.

Aya, in the basement, pressed the switch at the same time.

The moment that happened, the outer and inner surfaces of the Tower became covered with texts of prayers. The antenna on the rooftop began to glow a bluish white while giving off a growling sound. The land around the

Tower began to glow, and the light ran up to the top of it. The light accumulated at the antenna, and was then fired out. Incinerating the stardust in the way, the ray of light closed in on the heavenly god...

And made contact.

Surely, this hit must've dealt the heavenly god at least some damage. Surely, they must've helped to protect the world at least a little.

As the Senkeihou's attack hit, the world began changing, starting from the wall surrounding Shikoku. Mebuki knew what it was. The "Forestization" had begun.

(Heroes, it's up to you now. We did what we could... So you do what you can...) When Mebuki came to her senses, she found herself collapsed on the Gold Tower's rooftop. Next to her were Suzume, Shizuku and Yumiko, in the same condition.

Mebuki stood up and looked around. The dark red sky, the Stardust, the heavenly god - all of them were nowhere to be seen. The mark on her chest disappeared as well.

"Huh!? That huge disc thing is gone! The Stardust too!"

Suzume's eyes were darting around the place.

"Was the heavenly god... defeated?"

"The Heroes... did it."

Yumiko and Shizuku stood up and looked at the blue sky.

(They won... the Heroes... They protected this world.)

Mebuki looked down on the wintry Kagawa.

Shortly afterwards, her other comrades' voices began resounding through the communicator.

"All groups, damage report."

"Second group, three lightly wounded, no heavy injuries, no casualties!"

"Third group, one lightly wounded, no heavy injuries, no casualties!"

"Fourth group, two lightly wounded, no heavy injuries, no casualties!"

"Fifth group, two lightly wounded, no heavy injuries, no casualties!"

"Sixth group, four lightly wounded, no heavy injuries, no casualties!"

"Seventh group, three lightly wounded, no heavy injuries, no casualties!"

"Eighth group, three lightly wounded, no heavy injuries, no casualties!"

"...Thank you. No casualties this time too! Those wounded, get treated immediately! Mission complete!

From that day onward, the world changed. Though it would be more accurate to say that it returned to normal.

The heavenly god has disappeared, and the Shinju left its corpse behind. The wall surrounding Shikoku disappeared, and so have the roaring flames and sea of lava outside it. Instead there were the lands and ruins from before the Divine Era, preserved as they were.

On the day following the battle against the heavenly god, Aki the priestess came to the Gold Tower. Mebuki, Suzume, Yumiko, Shizuku and Aya were talking to her at the viewing platform. The windows were broken by Stardust during the battle, so the wind blew into it freely.

"Didn't you say... You wouldn't be coming to this tower again?"

"I did, Kusunoki-san. But I think I'm the one who should tell you. It's my responsibility as someone who was in charge of you."

"To tell us, what exactly?"

"First of all, yesterday the ceremony of Shinkon the Taisha planned on was refused by the so-called bride, Yuuki Yuuna-sama, a Hero, and the rest of the Heroes. In addition, the heavenly god, which appeared in response to the Shinkon, was also driven back by Yuuki Yuuna-sama."

"Shinkon?"

Aki explained the unfamiliar word to the confused Sentinels.

With Shinju's lifespan nearing its end, the Taisha was out of options. It was then they came up with a truly final solution - the Shinkon.

The girl most beloved by the gods would be offered to the ruler of the land gods as a bride. By doing that, humanity would be acknowledged as gods' kin. And in accordance to an agreement between the heavenly and land gods made aeons ago, the heavenly god would become unable to attack humanity.

The heavenly god became furious at humans approaching divine territory, and yesterday it finally made its appearance. That was an expected occurence, and so the Taisha dispatched the Heroes to hold it off until the Shinkon was completed. However, in the end, the Heroes and Yuuki Yuuna declined the Shinkon. And then they forced both the land gods and the heavenly god away.

"So that's why you knew when exactly the heavenly god would appear..."

If it was going to appear when the Shinkon started, then no wonder they knew the exact time.

The priest said about the Senkeihou "...all it has to do is slow its advance to a degree. And after that, leave it to the Heroes." Mebuki thought that they were expecting the Heroes to defeat the heavenly god, but it seemed she thought wrong. The Taisha were hoping that the Heroes would help the Shinkon happen.

But the Heroes went against their expectations, and drove the gods away.

"But you know, wouldn't it be good if the heavenly god didn't attack us anymore? Why'd the Heroes have to refuse it?"

Suzume tilted her head.

"The one taking part in Shinkon ascends to the divine realm, and becomes unable to interact with the mundane world... From a human standpoint, they essentially die. And they couldn't accept that. Especially the other Heroes, who held Yuuna-sama dear."

"D-Die!? Oh that's no good, of course not! Obviously they'd refuse it, what the hell!?"

Suzume raised a voice of shock. It was an answer that fit her, concerned with her life above everything lese, well.

"You people... were going to sacrifice someone, again."

Mebuki stared at Aki.

"...The Taisha was not united in its thoughts concerning the Shinkon. Some suggested to use it to drive the heavenly god to indignation, lure it out and strike it down. Although, the majority of the Taisha were in favour of becoming gods' kin, losing their human form and living together with the land gods... Not that it changes anything about the human sacrifice involved.

Aki continued in a monotone. When Mebuki heard "losing their human form" her breath was taken away. She had no idea what exactly those words implied, but she was certain it could no longer be called "living".

All of humanity almost became sacrifices. To save everyone, they were willing to sacrifice everyone. That was simply absurd. Or did the Taisha not think of "losing their human form" as a sacrifice? Or perhaps the Taisha, driven into a corner, simply lost their minds.

"Even with the ceremony incomplete, the most devout of the Taisha lost their human form during it. In fact..." Aki looked at Aya.

"Kokudo-san could've had the same happen to her."

"Me... too?"

It seemed that Aya was not told anything about the Shinkon.

"However, as you can see, Aya-san is in perfect health."

"It must've been because she was a part of the Senkeihou at the time, separated from outside influence. It could be said that you Sentinels and the Senkeiden kept Aya-san as she is."

"...Then that alone makes what we did worth it"

Mebuki was trying to swallow the truth.

Someone who opens the way to a world with no sacrifices. That was the "Hero" Mebuki strived to be. But if there was even one priest she didn't even know who lost their human form, then her goal was not reached. Just like with the Fire Offering Festival... Mebuki realised how powerless she was, and the fact ate at her. She still had a long way to go before she became the "Hero" she wanted to be.

But the fact they were able to protect Aya, their important friend, was a relief.

"Even though both the heavenly god and the land gods cannot be seen anymore, they did not disappear. Though far way, the heavenly god still resides in the heavens, and though they lost the form of Shinju-sama, the land gods dwell in all of creations... It's unlikely they will interfere with the human world again. The powers of Heroes and Sentinels are gone now. You are all back to being normal middle-schoolers. You probably won't have to fight again."

In response to Aki's words, Mebuki gave a clear answer.

"Fighting was never the Sentinels' duty in the first place. So it's fine if we don't have to. Our role, our duty is odd jobs. And in the chaotic world that's lost divine blessings, odd jobs are most important. There are a lot of things humans have to do now."

"...I see. That's a possible answer too."

Softness appeared in Aki's voice.

"But of course. Even with our battle dresses and divine powers gone, with a will as strong as mine it is possible to earn any achievements imaginable. I shall become the foundation of this new era! And carve the Miroku name into history!"

Yumiko seemed completely unperturbed by having lost Sentinel powers.

"Miroku-san, how exactly are you going to earn those achievements, huh? You're just an ordinary person now."

Yumiko closed her mouth under Suzume's mocking stare.

"T-That is something for Mebuki-san to think of. Now, Mebuki-san, let us become the foundation of this new era together!"

"Whoa, she just ditched responsibility! But well, I'm going to stay with Mebu too. Over the past half a year I realised this. There's no safer place in life than next to Mebu!"

"I'm with Kusunoki as well. SHIZUKU too. I want it like that."

Suzume came up to Mebuki's side, and Shizuku grasped her sleeve.

Aya stood, dumbfounded.

"What am... I supposed to do? The Shinju-sama is gone... How can humans live now?"

A significant part of the human society heavily relied on Shinju's blessings to function. With it gone, things could not continue the same way as before. It would be hard to maintain a society as prosperous as before.

And Aya, being a Miko, believed in the Shinju all her life. It must've been her guiding light. And the same must've stood for a lot of others, who lived all their lives with faith in the Shinju.

The human society lost a massive component of itself, both physically and spiritually. And Aya felt that anxiety more keenly than anyone else.

Mebuki began speaking in a kind tone.

"Before the Divine Era came to be, people lived without Shinju-sama's blessings just fine. Just the same as now. Humans can live on their own, without relying on gods."

"But without the Shinju-sama... How am I supposed to live my life?"

"Just like you always have. The Shinju-sama didn't exist in the Christian Era, but it doesn't mean people didn't believe in gods. "The Shinju is watching over me" "The Shinju is looking at me"... Even if god doesn't exist, if just believing will let you live your life right, then there's nothing wrong in believing. So even if the Shinju-sama no longer exists, if believing in it lets you live your life right, Aya-chan, then believe in it. And if you still don't know how you should live..."

Mebuki embraced Aya.

"I'm always with you, Aya-chan. So don't worry."

"Mebuki... senpai..."

Tears began streaming down Aya's cheeks.

"Ayaya, I-I'm with you too! Though I probably won't be very dependable..."

"And of course, you shall always have me to depend on! As I am the oldest, feel free to rely on me whenever you want!"

"Me too... And SHIZUKU... We're with you."

Suzume. Shizuku. SHIZUKU. Yumiko. All of them loved Aya just as much. So they would support her as much as she needed.

"So, Mebu. What are we going to do from now on?"

"Let's see..."

Mebuki folded her arms and began thinking. It didn't take her long to reach an answer.

"First of all, let's do the most Sentinel-like job."

"The most Sentinel-like?"

"Exploring the world outside Shikoku. The flames covering the land disappeared, but Christian Era ruins appeared instead of them, didn't they? If they really are the same as they were back then, then it's possible there are still valuable materials or equipment remaining in them. We can also get soil samples, and use the fields again if there's nothing wrong."

Humans lost divine blessings. But in return, they got what the the humans of the past left behind.

Standing at the viewing platform of the Gold Tower, Mebuki glared at the blue sky, at the vast land.

She was angry. At the gods who toyed with human fates and desired numerous human sacrifices.

As long as she had that anger and her friends by her side, she could continue walking no matter how far, even with her Sentinel powers gone.

(Just you watch, heavenly god, land gods. We humans will survive. With nothing but our human powers, we will survive, you'll see!)

## Chapter Bonus - Willows are green, flowers are red

Upon Shinju's wall surrounding Shikoku stood Miyoshi Karin and Kusunoki Mebuki. The two who, in the past, competed for the title of a Hero. After Karin was chosen for the duty, Mebuki hasn't seen her once. The reunion of the two took a considerable amount of time to happen.

The winter sky over their heads enveloped them in cold air. But take even one step beyond the barrier, and you would find yourself surrounded by a blazing inferno.

"...I've never expected to meet you here, Miyoshi-san".

"Same here..."

Karin's expression turned worried, and all sign of her usual strength of the mind disappeared from her face.

--

The city turned white.

"Waaaah, it's snow! Snow! Look at it piling up!"

Kagajou Suzume ran outside the Gold Tower, happily shouting.

"It's cold~! But there's snow!"

The ground was covered with a carpet of fresh snow. Suzume, full of excitement, ran around frolicking and leaving her footprints on its surface.

Long in the past, when land other than Shikoku still existed in the world, there were said to be places where, come winter, the plains would be always blanketed with snow. But now, with Shikoku alone remaining, it was rarely seen anywhere else but in the mountains.

"Oh dear, is mere snow really worth raising such a ruckus for? You are just like a puppy, despite your name meaning "sparrow""

Teased her Miroku Yumiko. As usual, she brought her table and chair, white as the snow surrounding them, outside the Gold Tower and was enjoying a spot of black tea.

"Miroku-san... Aren't you cold?"

"Mere cold shall not inhibit me from enjoying my refined tea time".

Since the plains were, for the first time in years, covered with snow, the cold was appropriately biting. Seeing Yumiko actually sit outside and drink tea in that weather made Suzume want to ask whether it was a form of ascetic training or if she lost a bet with someone.

"Suzume-san, you, too, should join me in enjoying this wintry landscape instead of frolicking like a chi-Cold!"

A snowball thrown by Suzume hit Yumiko on the shoulder, interrupting her words.

"How about some snowballs instead of black tea? Yumiko-san?"

"Su-zu-me-san!"

Her eyebrows furrowed in annoyment, Yumiko scooped up the snow near her feet and started clumping it into a ball. The two's snowball fight began right thereafter.

"Suzume, what are you doing? Today's training is about to start! Miroku-san, you too!?"

Said Kusunoki Mebuki in a strict tone. Next to her was Yamabushi Shizuku, expressionless as always.

"Eeh, but I don't wanna train, Mebu~! It's already the 26th of December~! It's time for the winter break already~!"

"We have our Sentinel duty laid upon us! And besides, a lot of companies work until New Year's Eve!"

"I'm against this kind of Sentinel exploitation~!"

The 300th year of the Divine Era was reaching its end.

Mebuki and the rest of the Sentinels stayed at the Gold Tower and continued

their training, preparing for a sortie that might yet still come.

Their duties in assisting the Kuni-zukuri were over, but the Sentinel troop itself was not disbanded. Shikoku was still facing a critical state of affairs. It was not unthinkable that an urgent need for them could occur.

After Aya escaped the fate of being a sacrifice in the Fire Offering Festival, the state of the world turned hectic. The amount of information the Sentinels received was small, but Mebuki could guess the situation to an extent.

Instead of the six Mikos, including Kokudo Aya, a Hero, Tougou Mimori, was offered to the Heavenly Gods. After that, the rest the Heroes, numbering five, rescued Mimori from the inferno raging outside the barrier. With the sacrifice gone, the situation returned to the starting point. The Taisha were scrambling to find a different countermeasure.

But Mebuki had nothing but praise for the Heroes' actions.

(That's Miyoshi-san and her allies, huh... You managed to do what I couldn't)

The one who opens a path with no sacrifices is a true hero - that was Mebuki's conviction. The current Heroes saved Mimori and let no one be sacrificed. So what if the situation returned to zero? They would just have to keep struggling till they found a way that would work.

"It's the winter break in normal schools, so I'm not gonna go to the training! My resolve is unbreakable!"

Three plans of dealing with Suzume's tantrum appeared in Mebuki's mind.

The first one was to simply drag her in by force.

The second one was to threaten to stop protecting her if she doesn't come.

The third one was to lure her in with mandarins.

She pondered which one to go with. The most effective one would probably be number two...

"Mebuki-san! Everyone!"

Aya rushed from the Tower, her face flushed and her expression agitated, and said with an encouraged voice.

"There's a big announcement! Everyone, please assemble at the viewing platform!"

By the time they reached the platform, the rest of the Sentinels were already assembled. A male priest was also present. The usual priestess, the one who was assigned to the heroes of the previous generation, was nowhere to be found. Even though she was the one who usually relayed information and orders to the Sentinels, she could be rarely seen lately. Instead, other priests came into the Tower to contact them.

The looks directed at the priest from the Sentinels were, with no exception, full of hostility and alert. After Aya was assigned to be a sacrifice, deep distrust towards the Taisha and the priests spread amongst them. All of them expected today's announcement to be something absurd and unreasonable again.

"I have these news to relay to you. As of today, the Taisha has started the procedure to abolish the duty of the Sentinels".

"...What do you mean? Are you saying that we're disbanded?"

Mebuki's tone, full of wariness, was met with a calm answer by the priest.

"No, this squad is going to stay as it is. However, you will no longer be titled "Sentinels", but official "Heroes" now".

"|"

The statement caused an uproar amidst the girls.

"This is a long way off, but your treatment will become equal to those of the Heroes, and the capabilities of your battle suits is expected to be greatly improved. Your families have already been informed. They are overjoyed with pride".

The duty of a Hero meant to be the one protecting the world. The highest of titles. The families the Heroes came from would become distinguished houses and would receive special support from the Taisha. Naturally, that duty was a dangerous one, but so was the one of a Sentinel. In short, there were no drawbacks in being promoted from a Sentinel to a Hero. Their families feeling joy was natural.

Of course, for the girls themselves the prestige that came with the title was a thing to be happy about, too. In the first place, all of them were formerly candidates to become Heroes, barely any of them were as convinced they would become one as Mebuki was. So for them, this sort of promotion was nothing short of a daydream.

The eyes narrowed in suspicion began to open wide and glimmer.

"Mr. priest, is that for real!?"

Suzume let out a high-pitched shrill in excitement.

"It is true. If you do not believe my words, please check with your family members".

If he says that, then it must be true.

The girls started raising a ruckus.

"Amazing!"

"We did it!"

"We're gonna become Heroes!"

"...So the Miroku family will now be a house that birthed a Hero, and its status will rise. I am so happy..."

Murmured Yumiko.

"We did it! We did it, Mebu! We're going to become heroes! This is incredible... Huh? Mebu, you don't look too happy..."

Suzume was confused by Mebuki's stiff expression.

Mebuki couldn't take those words at face value. The source of the Heroes' powers was the Shinju. With its own powers being stretched to the limits at the moment, could it possibly support 32 more Heroes? What if the Taisha were just feeding the Sentinels dreams of the impossible to raise their morale?

Shizuku tugged at Mebuki's sleeve.

"...Worried about something?"

She stared at her and asked.

After a brief period of silence, Mebuki wryly smiled and shook her head.

"...No. I just thought that it was a really good thing that we would be treated as Heroes now".

Mebuki no longer had any interest in being called a Hero by the Taisha. However, if the squad attained that rank, they would most likely no longer be belittled and considered disposable by the Taisha. And with the strengthening of their battle suits, the risk of death would decrease. For Mebuki's ideal of zero sacrifices, this was absolutely desirable.

Amidst the bustle of the girls excited by the talks of their promotion, Mebuki raised her voice.

"Everyone, listen!"

The Sentinels directed her attention to Mebuki.

"The promotion to Heroes is definitely something to be celebrated. But we're not official Heroes yet, and even after we do become them, danger will keep following us. So don't get complacent and lax in your training! Heroes or not, our squad will not produce any casualties! At all!"

The usual strictness of their leader had the girls tighten up and respond with an unanimous "Roger!"

--

"It's been a while, hasn't it?"

The day after the announcement of their promotion, Mebuki met the priestess. When she decided to drop by the viewing platform after her morning training routine, she saw the woman standing there.

"...I thought nobody would be awake right now. But that's right, you do usually begin your workout before the crack of dawn".

"It's not just me. Miroku-san follows the same routine as me, and a few others began performing morning training on their own".

"I see your influence keeps growing. It really was the correct choice to make you the commander of this unit".

Her never-changing emotionless voice made it impossible to understand whether Mebuki was being praised or ridiculed.

"I haven't seen you at the Tower in a while. Are you no longer in charge of us, then?"

"That's right. A lot of things came up that must be done. But me not being here is only a positive for the mental state of the Sentinels. There's hardly a lack of people who detest me here".

Since she was the one who delivered the news about Aya being chosen as a sacrifice in the Fire Offering Festival, plenty of the Sentinels viewed her with animosity.

"But you just told us the Taisha's decision".

"Even so, the bearer of the bad news is the one who will inevitably be hated. To the one who receives those news, they're the nearest object to loathe".

" ..."

Mebuki recalled the hatred for the priestess she had when the results of the Hero candidate competition were announced. Even though the priestess herself had no say in that decision.

Without any self-deprecation or self-pity in her voice, the woman continued.

"They must also be furious with me for not opposing that decision. And rightfully so. I haven't raised a single voice of protest against Kokudo-san being selected to be sacrificed".

"...You said that saving many by sacricing a few was the right thing to do, didn't you?"

"I did".

"Are those really your own thoughts?"

"What are you trying to say, Kusunoki-san?"

"It's obvious that the Taisha as a whole holds that belief. But what about you? Not as a member of the Taisha, but as your own self - do you really feel that way?"

"You've never shown any emotions around us. You've always erased any personal thoughts and feelings when you spoke. So I've been thinking: maybe those words were just said by you as a mouthpiece of the Taisha, and your personal beliefs are different?"

She was in charge of the Heroes of the previous generation and served as their homeroom teacher. And one of those heroes gave up her life in order to protect humanity. There's no way she could consider that sacrifice a "correct thing in order to protect the many".

"I don't have any different beliefs. The will of the Taisha is my will. All priests are a part of the Taisha... Just as the limbs do not defy the brain, the priests have no opinions differing from those of the Taisha's whole".

Having said that, the priestess passed by Mebuki and headed towards the elevator. While waiting for it to arrive, she spoke up again.

"It's unlikely that you will ever see me at this tower again".

"I see".

"I thought I would stay here until the Senkeiden (Palace of Thousand Views) was finished". [The kanji the word Senkeiden is written with can also be read as "Chikage-dono"]

"Senkeiden?"

"The name this Tower is called by inside the Taisha. A boundless expanse of the scenery can be seen from this viewing platform. A thousand views can be seen from up here, thus the name. It's said that the name was directly bestowed by the Uesato family. Its reconstruction is still underway, but once it is finished, the Gold Tower will officially change its name to Senkeiden.

The Uesato family was the elite amongst elites, and stood on top of the Taisha along with the Nogi family. If they ordered that to happen, then the name change would inevitably occur.

A ding signalled the arrival of the elevator, and the priestess left the platform.

According to what Mebuki heard later from other priests, the reconstruction

of the Gold Tower was not simply to provide the Sentinels with living quarters and training grounds. Just like the Great Seto Bridge once was, it was to become one of Shikoku's instruments of spiritual defence, and in case of emergency, would itself be launched against the invading heavenly forces to intercept them.

Mebuki was dumbfounded by even the idea of such a device being possible, but, if you thought about it, the ability to expel the Vertexes beyond Shikoku's borders the Great Seto Bridge possessed was already a product of super technology. With the power of the Shinju-sama and the technology of the Taisha, perhaps the equipment they imagined in the Senkeiden was, in fact, possible to create. But, all that said, it was apparently still more than half a year until the project would be finished.

--

The date changed to the 30th of December.

The year was ending.

The Sentinels returned to their homes in shifts of 5-6 people. If everyone left the Tower at once, they would not be able to react promptly in case of an emergency. And so, even at the end of the December, the majority of the squad remained at the Tower.

That day, Aya was skittering around the Tower from the dawn.

"Hmhm, hmhmmhm~"

Humming a song, she was sweeping the floor in high spirits. Since Aya loved cleaning, she would often tidy up indoors when she had free time and the Sentinels were away training or otherwise occupied. She was also the reason it was always so clean and neat inside.

Most of the Sentinels let Aya tidy up their rooms for them. In fact, she was so good at it, she even managed to evade the ever-common problem of "where did all of my stuff go?" that happens to occur when you let someone else do your cleaning. Dust and dirt would disappear without a trace, tables and chairs would end up sparkling clean and the futons would turn fluffy as clouds. Aya's housekeeping skills were extremely popular with the Sentinels.

At first, Mebuki did her cleaning herself. Partially because she didn't want to push any work on Aya, and partially because she feared for the safety of her plastic models and maquettes. But once she allowed her to clean her room, she saw that all of her precious models were left untouched and all of her instruments and training gear were sorted out neatly and conveniently. After that, she always left the cleaning to her capable hands.

For Aya, cleaning was her daily routine. But today she woke up and began even earlier than usual.

When she went to tidy up the mess hall, she spotted Mebuki and Yumiko, who trained together every morning.

"Oh, Kokudo-san. Are you currently cleaning?"

"You don't have to start doing it this early in the morning".

"The year's almost over, so I've been thinking about doing a grand cleaning of the entire Tower tomorrow".

It was then that the realisation of the year almost being over dawned upon Mebuki.

"Ah, right... The end of the year clean-up. It is almost time for that, huh. I'll help out too, then".

"No no, I'm fine! Everyone's always so busy with their training, so cleaning up is the least I can do".

"That won't do it. We Sentinels are the ones who use the facilities the most, so it's only right that we should clean them up, too".

"I shall assist you as well! And show just how much more skillfull and beautiful my cleaning will be than that of Mebuki-san! Sear into your eyes the technique of the Miroku-school cleaning!"

Even in trivial matters like cleaning, Yumiko's competitive spirit towards Mebuki burned hot.

Aya tried to refuse, but was, in the end, forced to accept Mebuki and Yumiko's help. Other Sentinels started showing up and joining them. In the end, it was decided that day and the following one would be free of training and

spent on the large-scale clean-up of the Tower instead.

"Suzume-san! Why is that corner of your room buried in boxes full of mandarins!? Do you intend to let them all rot!? Share them with the rest of us at once!"

"Aah, my mandarins! Waah, Mebu! Miroku-san is trying to steal my mandarins! And anyway, Miroku-san, you stuffed the staff-use fridge in the mess hall full of skipjack tuna yourself!"

"Kuh... So I get summoned to change over, and for what? Cleaning! Damn you, Shizuku... You just wanted to play hooky! Now that's it's come to this, time to go all out and finish this damn cleaning!"

"SHIZUKU! Brooms are for sweeping the dust properly, not swinging them around like a flail! You're just scattering it around!"

The cleaning steadily proceeded, if not without turmoil.

--

The winter sun is quick to go down.

By the time the great cleaning of the Gold Tower finished, the veil of night has long descended upon Daisoku.

"Thank you very much, everyone! I thought this would take two days, but with your help, we all finished it by today!"

Aya bowed to all of the Sentinels, gleaming, after they were done with the Tower and all of the training facilities and gathered in the mess hall.

"Uuh... Cleaning sure takes a lot of energy..."

Suzume, completely exhausted, was lying flat on the table. Shizuku silently nodded in agreement. Although SHIZUKU was the one working at first, she changed places with Shizuku after getting tired.

The rest of the Sentinels also displayed the same worn-out faces.

"How can you be this exhausted from just that amount of cleaning? Are you all, perhaps, not used to it? Behold me, not even slightly tired!"

Suzume glared at the elated Yumiko.

"Miroku-san", doesn't saying that you're used to cleaning make you sound like a commoner and contradict your rich girl backstory?"

"Huh!? No, it is not as if I am used to it or anything of the sort, my training is simply on a different level so my stamina is... Excuse me, but it is not a backstory!"

Mebuki was shocked by how much work Aya planned to accomplish on her own. What the thirty three people did in one day she planned to do on her own in two. In fact, despite not having anywhere as much stamina as the Sentinels, she worked much more efficiently and didn't look that tired at all.

"Since we finished the cleaning today, tomorrow is free now..."

Aya muttered, as if trying to think up new plans for tomorrow.

"Well, we Sentinels are going to train as usual".

"Eeeeh!? Mebu, I don't wanna train on New Year's Eve! Ayaya, come on, you have something to do in mind, right!? It doesn't have to be cleaning, just something!"

"Uh, let's see... Then let's make mochi and other New Year's food tomorrow and have a proper celebration!"

The next day, the girls went to Ines to buy the necessary things for the party. The Ines in Daisoku stood just between the Gold Tower and the train station, so it was just ten minutes of walking away.

To leave the Tower, the Sentinels had to put in a request and have it approved. Both Mebuki, for her running course around the city, and Yumiko, for her tea at the seaside park, had to go through these procedures all the time. Leaving the Tower for shopping and other activities like that was permmitted on specific days and at specific hours. The procedure must have been in place so that the Sentinels' movements were always known.

A bit of trouble occured before they went out. Since Aya always stayed at the tower, she rarely went outside. And inside the Tower, she always wore her Miko garb. Thus, she had no clothes other than those and a set of pajamas.

And going to Ines in Miko attire was, obviously, impossible. She would stand

out too much, and if anything happened, the Taisha wouldn't take it lightly.

With no other choices, Mebuki lent her some spare clothes she had. Since the size difference was pretty big, the clothes were pretty baggy, but Aya seemed happy.

"Thank you very much, Mebuki-senpai. I'll treasure these".

"Don't sweat it. They don't even fit, it's just a temporary measure. Oh, that's right, we should get you some clothes while we're at Ines".

"No, I'm fine with these".

Said Aya with a smile.

Well, as long as she likes them.

For their shopping, the girls split up into several groups. The ones buying ingredients for the New Year's food, the ones buying garlands and decorations, the ones buying mochi rice and mochi pounding equipment and so on.

Mebuki, Suzume, Yumiko, Shizuku and Aya were on the ingredient-buying group.

Since Ines was a holding a large end-of-the-year sale, the mall was bustling with people.

"Gyah! I'm being swallowed by the crowd! Save me, Mebu~!"

"Aya-chan, give me your hand so you don't get lost".

"Okay!"

Aya took Mebuki's left hand.

"If you happen to be afraid of being stranded, I would not mind lending my hand".

"But I want to be with Mebu!"

Suzume grabbed Mebuki's right hand.

Shizuku, without saying a word, held to the cuff of Mebuki's sleeve.

Yumiko looked slightly dejected.

"S-So be it then. I shall enjoy my fill of dignified freedom, shackled by no

one!.."

"Wait a bit, Miroku-san! I can barely move like this, so can you be at our lead? In this kind of crowd it will get much easier to move if we have someone at the front".

Yumiko grinned.

"Very well then! Miroku Yumiko shall take the honour of leading this troop!"

After the shopping was finished and everyone returned to the Tower, the people who could cook started work on the New Year's dishes. Those who couldn't made mochi with the mochi pounding machine. There were no cooking skills needed, all you needed to do was to flip the switch on it and then separate and roll the resulting mochi sheet in balls of the right size.

And when the night came, everyone ate some end-of-the-year udon.

As midnight drew closer, some girls began to get fidgety. Apparently they planned to make their first shrine visit of the year, but weren't sure if they would be allowed to go out so late at night.

Eventually, under the condition that Mebuki be supervising them, a group of 10 or so girls left towards the Ubushina shrine. The Ubushina shrine was the main shrine of Daisoku, and was just across the railroad tracks from the Gold Tower.

The wintry night air was cold, and the girls' breathing turned into white clouds. On their way there, they could see other people heading to the same shrine for their first visit of the year.

"Mebu~, my hands are cold!"

Suzume was trying to warm her hands up by breathing at them.

"You should've taken gloves with you".

"It's too late now... Right! If I do this, it's warm!"

Suzume thrust both of her hands into Mebuki's pockets.

"Suzume, quit it! It's hard to walk!"

"I don't wanna! It's so warm this way!"

Realising that nothing she can say could change Suzume's mind, Mebuki gave up resistance.

"By the way, Mebuki-senpai, is it really alright that you haven't visited your home?"

Asked Aya while walking.

In the end, Mebuki didn't return home. The rest of the Sentinels visited their homes in shifts, but Mebuki stayed at the Gold Tower the whole time.

"I'm the commander. If I'm not around, who would lead the squad if something happened?"

"But still, won't your family worry?"

"Probably not. I haven't been home for the New Year in three years already".

When she was training as a Hero candidate, Mebuki didn't return home either. New Year or not, all she had her mind on was her training.

And Mebuki's father, her only family, said nothing about her not returning. As a man who lived for his work, he probably had no complaints about Mebuki putting her best effort into fulfilling her duty.

"Now that I think about it, I probably haven't done a first shrine visit of the year in three years, too. Same with pounding mochi, decorating trees and having New Year's dishes".

"Do you not like that noise kind of celebrations?"

Asked Aya with a slightly troubled face.

Mebuki glanced over the Sentinels around her.

Suzume, who had her hands in Mebuki's pockets. Shizuku, who always stayed near without saying anything. Yumiko, who was at the very front of the group to reach the shrine faster than anyone else. The other girls, who were chatting with their own friends while waling.

Mebuki let out a soft smile.

"No, they're not bad. Sometimes, this kind of stuff is fine too".

Aya looked relieved by the answer.

"Then, Mebuki-senpai, how about going home for this New Year? That kind of stuff should be fine too, sometimes, right?"

There was a deep kindness in her words.

The cold night wind kept blowing. As they got closer to the shrine, the amount of visitors increased. Mebuki kept walking in silence, without giving an answer. Then, at the end of the road, they could see the shrine's lamps glimmer, and Mebuki finally answered.

"...That's right, I guess I'll return this year. Maybe Daddy will be glad to see me".

"...!?"

The girls around her froze in place.

Mebuki's eyes widened in surprise. What happened to them?

"Mebu... You call your father "Daddy"?"

"N-No! I call him "Father". That was just a slip of the tongue. A slip of the tongue, okay?"

"Definitely calls him..."

"No doubt about that..."

"At home, for sure..."

"Daddy, huh..."

The Sentinels started whispering around.

"I said I don't!"

Mebuki objected with a beet-red face.

In the end, Mebuki returned home for the first time in months, even if just for a few days.

But nothing dramatic happened when she returned. No grandiose welcoming parties or spending the entire day talking. Neither Mebuki no her father were particularly talkative people in the first place.

But her father knew about her exploits as a Sentinel from the Taisha's reports.

And so, he said to his daughter just one thing.

"I'm glad for you, Mebuki".

That was enough.

On the day she was to return to the Tower, Mebuki spotted a book with the same title as the words someone once told her in a book store at the Tamamo station.

"Beneath the wheel". A classic story from the Old Era.

She bought it, sat down on the train and began to read it. By the time they reached Daisoku, she finished it.

An earnest, hardworking boy, after back-breaking efforts, achieves success. After that, he gets crushed by the expectations from his surroundings, parts with his best friend, gets sick and, in the end, loses his life. It was a tragic story.

But Mebuki didn't meet the same end.

Did she put in more effort than him?

Was she more talented than him?

No, that wasn't it.

(...I had friends I could trust in and walk alongside with... Until the very end...)

She was not alone. The difference between Mebuki and the boy from the story was just that. She had that blessing alone.

The unjust wheel of the world could run over someone who fell beneath it in a blink of an eye. But that wheel was not a massive one, and could rarely run over more than just one person. And so, it couldn't crush those that clinged together. Together with trustworthy friends one could push that wheel back and break it apart.

And so, the beginning of the year has passed.

--

Divine Era, year 301.

The duty of the Sentinels was still on hold.

But eventually, after January has already passed its middle point, the Sentinels were finally tasked with a mission again. Even if that mission wasn't anything special.

All they were asked of was to verify the current condition of the world outside. If that was all they could give them, then the Taisha must've reached a deadlock.

Atop of the wall stood thirty two Sentinels and Aya, who was sending them off.

"Well, everyone, let's start our mission! As always, we're achieving our goal without a single casualty!"

"Roger!"

The girls donned their battle suits.

"All of you, please return safely!"

With Aya's prayer supporting them from behind, the girls descended from the wall into the scorching wasteland.

The Sentinels were making their rounds near the wall and collecting the burnt soil and magma into their kagami.

"It's really hot in here, Mebu! I'm gonna fry to death!"

"It appears that the situation outside the barrier worsened... This must most likely be because of the Heavenly gods' anger at the sacrifice being taken away. How unsightly... Not very magnanimous for gods, are they?"

"Well, it sure is hot, but at least there ain't no enemies left around but the Stardust. Can't see the huge merged ones or the Vertex-alikes anywhere".

The occasional approaching Stardust group would be shot full of holes and then cut up with bayonets. In their current state, the Sentinels could take down Stardust with barely any danger at all.

Suddenly, SHIZUKU squinted and readied her rifle.

"Hey, Kusunoki! There's something there".

The Sentinels, starting with Mebuki, aligned their gazes with SHIZUKU's.

"That is... A human".

Yumiko held her gun at the ready with caution. In the distance, a human figure could be seen leaping from one Stardust to another.

The Sentinels pointed their muzzles at the figure and waited with tension. Apart from the Sentinels, the only beings outside the barrier should have been Stardust and Vertexes.

Was it the Gemini Vertex, the one that bore a humanoid form?

But Mebuki and Suzume immediately recognised that figure.

"Lower your weapons, everyone. That's not an enemy".

"Yeah... That's one of the Heroes, Miyoshi-san".

A red, assymmetrical battle costume.

It was Miyoshi Karin.

Having collected enough samples of the soil, the Sentinels returned inside the barrier. Mebuki sent the rest of the Sentinels and Aya back, and was standing atop the wall together with Karin.

Karin was clearly not her usual self. The girl Mebuki knew had confidence in herself and always looked strong. But the Karin standing before her right now looked full of doubt, not a trace of confidence and willpower remaining on her face.

Why was a Hero like her beyond the barrier in the first place?

"...I've never expected to meet you here, Miyoshi-san".

"Same here..."

With no energy in her voice, muttered Karin.

"Kusunoki, you... are serving a duty of surveying the world outside the barrier now, right? Sentinel, was it?"

The old Mebuki would probably bite back with a "I am. You took the terminal from me, after all". But the current one accepted those words without any opposition.

"That's right. Did you hear from the Taisha?"

"Nope, not them. Ever since we left that place, I didn't know anything about what you were doing. But I have a friend who knows a lot about the Taisha's matters, so I asked her to look into it and she told me you were now serving as something called a Sentinel".

"I see..."

"Honestly, I wanted to meet you sooner, but I couldn't find out where you stayed yet. Apparently, the Taisha doesn't want the Heroes and the Sentinels to meet".

"We were forbidden from meeting you Heroes as well".

As an exception, Suzume got to meet the current Heroes before she became a Sentinel. After hearing that the Heroes studied at the Sanshuu Middle school, some girls wanted to go there to meet them too. But they were, of course, not given permission to go out for the reason of "meeting the Heroes". Quite the opposite, the ban on the Sentinels' contact with the Heroes was strictly enforced.

There wasn't anybody who tried to go meet the Heroes under the guise of something else. The stations and all of the roads were, most likely, under Taisha's control, so going to Sanshuu Middle was deemed impossible.

"This encounter is nothing short of a miracle, don't you think?"

"Right..."

"So, Miyoshi-san... What were you doing outisde the wall? Is it connected to your Hero duty?"

"Not at all. That was for my own personal reasons. I wanted to see the state of the world outside".

"...For what reason?"

"I thought I could figure something out... There's someone I want to save... So I thought I could figure out a way..."

Karin tightly pursed her lips, her frustration seeping out.

Carefully choosing her words, she began to explain the situation to Mebuki.

Since the explanation was rather vague, Mebuki couldn't grasp the exact circumstances, but from what she understood, a really dear friend of Miyoshi Karin was in an extremely dire state. And the reason for that was, most likely, the Heavenly gods. The Fire Offering Festival was stopped. The Heroes rescued their comrade, Tougou Mimori, who was chosen to be a sacrifice instead of the Mikos. The Heavenly gods' fury still unquenched, the end of Shinju's lifespan drew closer. And as a result of that, a disaster fell upon that friend.

She couldn't guess anything more concise from Karin's words. It was possible that she was being hard to understand on purpose.

"So we're looking for a way to save her... I went outside the wall, thinking I could find a hint there or something... But there wasn't anything there".

Said Karin with self-deprecation.

"As usual, you just can't leave other people alone, huh. Just like back then... Miyoshi-san, you're naive".

"You're right... You told me that back then at the facility too".

"But I understand your feelings right now".

"Eh?"

Then, Mebuki thrust her bayonet at Karin.

"!?"

Even though taken by surprise, Karin managed to evade the blade by a paperthin margin. Mebuki followed up with a slash. Karin summoned her swords in a flash and repealed the bayonet.

"Wha... What's wrong with you all of a sudden!? What are you doing!?"

"Miyoshi Karin! What is with that disheartened face!?"

Mebuki continued her bayonet stabs and swings. Wielding her swords with fearsome speed, Karin kept dodging the attacks.

"You!"

While evading Mebuki's attacks, Karin found a chance to counterattack and

swung her sword.

Mebuki stopped that strike at the last moment, but the impact almost threw the rifle out of her hands.

(You really are strong, Miyoshi-san! Skill, power, strength... All of them are extraordinary. This is... This is exactly why!)

Still locked up in their fight, Mebuki shouted.

"Lift your head and face forward! Be fearless and full of confidence! Wipe that sorry look from your face!"

"What are you-"

"You're a Hero! The one and only person who's ever won against me! Don't you dare being such a pathetic sight! If you want to, then quit being a Hero right now!"

"As if I... would!"

With a yell, Karin smashed her swords into Mebuki's rifle. It flew away and fell onto the ground.

Karin pointed the tip of her blade at the eyes of Mebuki, now weaponless.

"I'm a Hero! I'll definitely save her! No matter what it takes, I'll save her!" In response to Karin's bellowing, Mebuki nodded.

"That's right. This is how you should be... Miyoshi-san, if there's anything I can do to help you save your friend, I'll do all that's in my powers".

Karin looked shocked. The girl who formerly called her naive for helping other people now offered to assist with helping someone.

Mebuki didn't know who Karin's friend that she wanted to save was. But her goal was a world with no sacrifices. And for that ideal of hers, and to help a former rival of hers, she was willing to do her utmost.

Back then, Mebuki hated the soft Karin who was constantly concerned for the others. But right now, she understood Karin's feelings so much it hurt. Because right now Mebuki had precious friends of her own.

"Thank you. But suddenly attacking me like that... Kusunoki, it feels like you're

angry all of the time."

"...Does it?"

"It does. But I guess that's a part of your power too".

Having said that, Karin turned around.

"Well, I should be on my way soon".

"Same here".

The Hero - Miyoshi Karin.

The Sentinel - Kusunoki Mebuki.

Their positions were different. So it was unlikely they'd ever meet on a battlefield. But their reasons for fighting were the same. To save someone. So nobody would die an unreasonable death.

"You know, Kusunoki".

With her back turned, Karin asked.

"When we sort everything out, let's meet and talk again. Not like this, but at ease. When I really think about it, I don't know anything about you".

"I agree. I don't know anything about you either, Miyoshi-san. Even thought we've spent quite a lot of time competing against each other back then".

How they lived before entering the facility. Why they were so fixated on becoming a Hero. And how they were living their lives right now.

"There are some guys I want you to meet".

"Who?"

"A bunch of softies and optimists. Two of them were close friends of that Minowa Gin, too".

"...I see. That does sound like there would be a lot to talk about".

As the two primary candidates in inheriting her terminal, Mebuki and Karin were apparently close to Minowa Gin mentally. Mebuki wanted to know what kind of person that girl was.

"Well, see you".

"See you too".

Karin jumped off from the wall and disappeared into the distance.

Mebuki saw her off in silence.

(Bonus chapter - end)

PS: Translation of all 6 chapters + Bonus chapter are taken from https://pastebin.com/2wvjCyrV , I don't take credit for translating anything.